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The Prof Croft Series

Books 0 - 4

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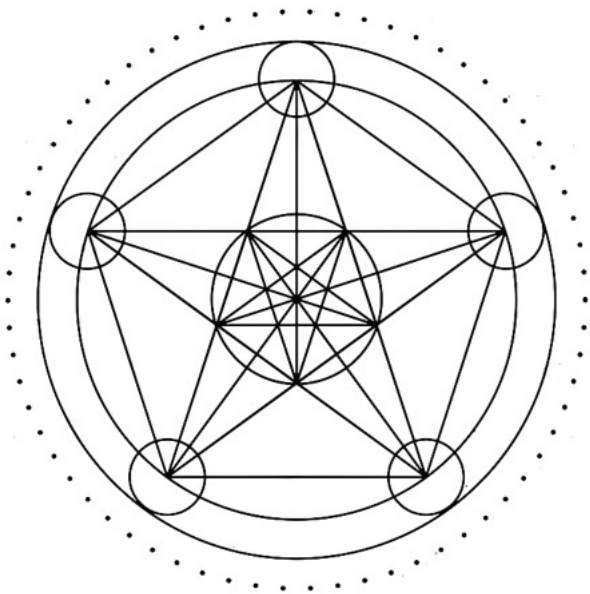
A Prequel Novella



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1

My heart thumped hard and high in my chest as I sealed the door onto a pulsating blackness.

Turning, I snapped on my flashlight. Through a suspension of dust, bookcases loomed from the too-close walls. At the far end of the room, a large steamer trunk and an antique desk leaned in and out of the shadows, the desk featuring an old lamp with a blood-red shade and brass pull chain.

As I stepped from the door, the fear that had been balling up my insides let out, allowing a euphoric excitement to seep in. An entire life lived in this house, thirteen years to the day, and I had never been inside Grandpa's attic study. I was in unchartered territory.

Even better, forbidden territory.

I ran my beam over the titles on the bookshelves. An old encyclopedia set, row after row of books on insurance and insurance law. Boring titles, but my proximity to them made the hair on my arms tingle straight. Maybe it was because I knew almost nothing about my grandfather, a man who was rarely home, who rarely spoke even when he was. A man whose dour eyes and foreign accent scared the hell out of my friends—and me, if I was being honest.

I trained my beam on his trunk. A large, battered container of black wood and metal that looked for all the world like a pirate's chest. I undid both hasps and worked my fingernails around the edge of the central lock, surprised when the spring-loaded latch fell open.

A shot of anticipation jiggled my bladder. I clamped the flashlight between shoulder and cheek, placed my hands on the front of the lid … and hesitated. As freaky as it sounded, the trunk felt alive. And it wasn't just the warmth of the pliant wood. A force was moving through my hands, a steady rising and falling, like breathing. And was that a heart beat?

My own heart lurched as I spun from the trunk. No, not a heart beat—footsteps, on the attic stairs. Their steady cadence accompanied by wooden taps now, growing louder.

Shit. Grandpa.

I replaced the hatch, refastened the hasps, and shot my beam around the study. A closet! In five jerky steps, I was plunging into a

line of hanging coats and pulling the folding door closed behind me. A beat later, just as I snapped off my light, the study door creaked open and then closed again.

A heavy silence followed. I held my breath, sure Grandpa could sense my presence.

He uttered one of his strange words: *"Serrare."* Pressure built in my ears as the floorboards clicked and a dangling bulb flooded the room with weak light. I stiffened in my crouch. Grandpa's tall figure entered my view through the seam above the closet door's middle hinge, his back to me. I released my breath and blinked to moisten my eyes again.

Though the man usually carried himself like a ruler, his shoulders sloped now, as though bearing a large load. He set his cane and fedora on the desk and, sighing, ran a hand through his thinning hair. The silver ring with the dragon gleamed dully on his middle finger.

I once asked Nana why Grandpa was so quiet. What I was really asking, of course, was why he paid so little attention to me. Nana seemed to understand, her lips creasing into a tender smile. "When your grandfather was a young man," she explained, "he fought in a long war. An awful war. He saw many terrible things. Some people never recover from that kind of experience."

"Do you mean World War Two?" I asked.

She didn't nod, only repeated, "An awful war."

From the closet, I watched Grandpa pace in front of his desk. Seeming to arrive at a decision, he straightened and turned to the nearest bookcase.

"Svelare," he said. Another strange word, spoken with depth and resonance.

A charge stirred the air, and the bookcase … rippled. In the time it took for me to lean closer to the door seam, the books became other books. No more encyclopedias or insurance manuals. Humming quietly, Grandpa skipped his fingers across folios and old leather bindings. I was studying Latin in school and could translate several of the titles. Man, were they weird.

Grandpa's fingers stopped at an especially large tome, *Book of Souls*, and drew it out.

Motes of light fluttered from the spreading pages. He waved at them absently until they dissipated. Turning slowly, the book open at his chest, he traced a finger across the page, lips moving. Maybe from staring at Grandpa for so long without blinking, a purple hue took shape around him. I squeezed my eyes closed and opened them again, but the effect remained.

When a hard knock sounded, I tried to angle my view toward the study door. Nana? But with the second bout of knocking, I realized it

wasn't coming from the door. It was coming from Grandpa's steamer trunk.

Holy hell, someone's in there.

"Yes, what is it?" Grandpa answered distractedly.

Though I couldn't make out the words coming from the trunk, the voice had a sniveling quality.

"Mm-hmm," Grandpa said, still absorbed in his book.

The voice said something else.

Grandpa's finger stopped moving. The aura of light surrounding him tightened. He raised his face until his gaze lined up with mine. The book clapped closed.

My bladder jiggled again, this time in horror. When I tried to draw back, Grandpa uttered something and the coats began shoving against me. *What the…!* Through the seam in the door, I saw him swapping the book for his walking cane. My eyes jerked around, but there was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.

All in one moment, the door opened, the coats thrust me out, his hand seized my wrist, and a steel blade flashed, biting deep into my first finger.

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2

Ten years later

"You are fool."

I raised my eyes from the thin scar on my finger, twisting on the wooden bench to face the cart driver. For the last two hours, the Romanian man had been silent, even when I made a few stabs at conversation in Slovak. He shook the horses' dripping reins, a peasant's hat hiding the top half of a face that stared at the muddy road ahead. I'd assumed the man was reticent, not given to conversation. But had he just called me a fool?

I cleared my throat. "Come again?"

The cart's wheels jounced through another brown puddle as rain continued to patter over my hooded jacket. For miles we'd traversed nothing but fields and poor farmland, but up ahead I could make out the first houses of a village proper, weathered plaster affairs with red-tiled roofs. Perhaps in anticipation of food or rest, the pair of horses snorted and sped their clopping pace. After traveling non-stop for the last twenty-four hours, on planes, trains, and now a cart, I knew the feeling.

Just when I thought the driver had fallen back into his silence, he spoke again. "You come for curiosity."

"Sort of." I eyed him carefully—where had I heard all of this before? "I'm headed to the ruins of an old monastery. Dolhasca. Supposed to be a two-day's hike from the village. Maybe you've heard of it?"

I had managed to acquire a survey map of the area, onto which I'd plotted my best estimate of the monastery's location, but I was hoping to find someone to give me clearer directions—or better yet, to guide me.

"Why?" he asked, pronouncing it *vy?*

"Research. I'm a doctoral student. Dolhasca's founding monks are supposed to have transcribed some lost texts. I want to see if I can locate them. They may shed light on early European beliefs."

It was the same explanation I had given while applying for my research grant, but it was only half the truth. The other half was that, after years of searching, I believed I was close to locating a book that would explain who my grandfather had been, besides an insurance man.

"That is why you are fool," he said.

"And why is that, exactly?"

"The journey." He looked over to where the valley rose into dark forested hills, the white-capped Carpathian Mountains jutting beyond. "It will be your death."

I'd been warned that this region of Romania was still rife with superstition, but wow.

"Let me guess … evil spirits?" I scoffed. The pit of hunger in my stomach, not to mention my sore butt, had lowered my tolerance for nonsense. I was going full smartass. "Ogres? Witches?"

"Wolves," he replied.

"Oh." I let out an embarrassed laugh. "Well, we have wolves too, and they're not man eaters."

"Then your wolves are not like ours."

I eyed the forest. "What makes yours so special?"

Even as I asked, a cold foreboding prickled through me. Beyond the water dripping from the brim of the man's hat, sober gray eyes fixed on mine. He palmed his sodden hat, lifted it from his head, and turned so the muted light caught his disfigured profile. The four scar lines began at his right temple—ridges through his matted black hair—and raked across his cheek. I had assumed the cloudiness of his right eye was the result of cataracts, but now I saw how the topmost scar ended at the split eyelid.

"A *wolf* did that?" I asked.

He replaced his hat. "I was young fool. I did not believe stories."

I swallowed. All right, maybe I needed to rethink my approach. "Are there any villagers who moonlight as armed escorts?"

"None will go into forest."

The cart's axles groaned as we arrived in the muddy village square. Though we were no longer in the countryside, a smell of wet beasts and turned-up earth filled the damp air. The horses clopped past a stucco church and a couple of store fronts until the driver drew back on the reins. We came to a snorting stop in front of the village's lone pension—four bedrooms with breakfast provided, if the entry in my guidebook was to be believed.

The driver climbed down and plodded around to the back of the cart. I joined him from the other side, water squelching through my hiking shoes. I eyed his battered rubber boots in envy. He threw a tarp to one side, and from between stacks of crates pulled out my traveling

backpack, which he set on the steps of the pension.

I counted out several bills. “Thanks for the ride.”

As he accepted the money and pressed it into a shirt pocket, I noticed the dull ring on his third finger. A familiar figure was embossed in the thick face: a rearing dragon.

“Y-your ring,” I stammered. “My grandfather had one just like it. Where did you get it?”

He looked down at the ring briefly and without interest. “A street seller.” Climbing back up to his seat, he took the reins in hand but hesitated mid snap. “Do not be fool,” he said, peering down on me. “The journey is not for mortals. It will not forgive curiosity or covetousness. Tell your friends this.”

“Friends?”

He raised his gray eyes to the pension.

“You are not only foreigner here.”

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3

I encountered foreigner number one just beyond the pension's entrance, in a sitting room. The young man, with a stylish tousle of blond hair and cheery blue eyes, looked to be about my age. He sat in a corner chair facing the door, a glass of dark wine in hand, as though waiting for someone to join him in drink and conversation.

"Lovely weather, eh mate?" he said in a pleasant English accent.

I wiped my shoes on the mat and dropped my pack beside the door. I was interested in food, a bath, and a bed, in that order. There was no space on my immediate itinerary for chit-chat.

"Name's James." He pushed up a sweater sleeve and crossed the room with his hand extended.

I dried my hands on the sides of my pants and accepted his hearty shake. "Everson Croft."

"Let me guess. You're also on the hunt for the fabled manuscripts of Dolhasca?"

I stopped unzipping my jacket and looked up at him.

He laughed as though we'd just shared in a particularly clever joke. "I read the article in the *Historical Journal*, too. I'm a fifth year at Oxford. European History."

"Midtown College in New York," I replied. "Mythology."

"Sharp minds think alike, eh?" He clapped my shoulder.

"Guess so," I muttered.

He switched to an old form of Latin. *"The manuscripts are said to be in archaic Latin."*

I nodded and answered in kind. *"So I've heard."*

He beamed at me as though I'd passed some test. "Well go on," he said. "Shed your jacket, grab a towel. I'll ready you a glass of the local spirit. Not vintage, mind you, but it gets the job done."

At least he wasn't treating me like a rival. Academics could be petty that way. Take the new chairman of my history department, Professor Snodgrass. Now *there* was a piece of work. I sank into the couch and accepted the glass of wine he'd prepared. James raised his own glass brightly and we both sipped. To my surprise, the hit of alcohol, coupled with the soft cushion, soothed my travel pains and the irritability that went with them. James tugged at the white collar

of a shirt that poked from his too-green sweater. He could have been a golfer taking a break from the links.

"So how long have you been here?" I asked.

"Since Monday. I was hoping to set out for the monastery yesterday, but the weather's been bloody dreadful." He sighed and gazed out a window running with rain water. Distant lightning paled his face in twin flashes.

"You sound confident in the monastery's location."

"Well, I have technology to thank for that." As he dug in his pocket, the ensuing thunder rolled in, shaking the walls. James held up what looked like a small two-way radio, a rubber antenna poking from the top. "Using a satellite map program, I was able to identify the ruins. That gave me a GPS location. According to this, the monastery is approximately 48 kilometers north by northwest from our current position." He held the device toward me. "Care to take a look?"

"No, no." I leaned away and showed my palms. "I have a way of breaking that stuff."

It was true. Technology never failed to get pissy in my presence. The last time I'd tried to use a library computer, the screen blacked out and smoke drifted from the keyboard. Seconds later, the entire college network crashed. Fortunately, I was a whiz on my mechanical typewriter.

James shrugged and returned the GPS device to his pocket.

"But, hey…" I went to retrieve my pack. "Would you mind looking over my maps and telling me if I'm in the proximity?"

"What in God's name for?" James asked. "Now that you're here, we can make the journey together."

I lowered myself back to the couch. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Two heads are better than one. I'd enjoy the company, besides."

"Well cheers to that." I raised my glass, and we drank again, my worries over the monastery's location resolved. But with the next flashes of lightning, I recalled the driver's scars, the pale ridges of tissue shining through his damp hair. The wolf's claws must have flayed the poor bastard to his skull.

"Something the matter?" James asked.

"Has anyone warned you about going into the forest?"

"Other than everyone I've talked to?" He smiled and waved a hand. "We're in the old country, mate. Good people, the very salt of the earth, but simple minds. Where there are unexplored wilds, there must be monsters, right?"

"I get your point. But I'd feel better if we had an escort. There *have* been wolf attacks."

James examined his held-up glass with an unconcerned air. "I've

already asked around. No one's interested, I'm afraid. It seems there are only four of us willing to venture into those wilds."

The driver *had* mentioned foreigners, plural. "Who are the other two?"

"Well, there's a Flor from Spain." He lowered his voice. "A treat for the eyes, but beware her tongue. I believe I still have a few welts from our little disagreement this morning at breakfast." He chuckled as he rubbed his upper arm. "The other is Bertrand, a prominent French academic. Not particularly friendly, though."

"A real United Nations," I remarked, to which James chuckled again. "And they're trying to reach Dolhasca, too?"

He nodded. "But we've all been pinned down by the weather. We have that and the monastery in common, if nothing else."

"What if we all set out together?" I asked. "The stronger our numbers, the less likely any wolves would be to mess with us, right?"

"Sounds like perfectly good reasoning to me, but you'll need to convince the others. Their interest in Dolhasca seems nothing short of *mercenary*." He pronounced the word as though the concept were far beneath him.

"Maybe we can all meet for dinner this evening," I said. "Talk it over."

"Splendid. I'll arrange it. There's a restaurant on the corner." He bussed my empty glass. "But you should go up and get some rest, my friend. You look right knackered."

I did as James suggested, finding the pension owner, an elderly woman, who showed me to a simple room on the second floor. After washing up, I lay on the single bed, the day's motion swimming through my exhausted body. It was hard to believe I was less than thirty miles from the *Book of Souls*—a title that vanished from Grandpa's collection with his death. A title research had shown me should never have existed in the twentieth century.

But then to read of it last month in the *Historical Journal*, the author believing that Dolhasca's founding monks had transcribed reams of lost texts and tomes, among them the *Book of Souls*. I closed my eyes. To think that in two days time I could be holding the same book I had seen in Grandpa's hands ten years earlier. My thoughts began to drift on that thought.

I was nearly asleep when, in the far distance, a wolf's cry went up.

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4

Bertrand shook his head emphatically, eyes closed. *“No.”*

“Why not?” I asked.

“I planned a solo expedition,” he replied in a stuffy French accent, “and a solo expedition it will remain.”

The middle-aged man sitting across from me was tall and lean with a sour face and eyelids that fluttered when he voiced an objection, which was often. James had been right about the “not particularly friendly” bit. More to the point, he was a dick.

“And we are after the same manuscripts, no?” he continued. “Why would I want to share my findings with a group of amateurs?” He returned to his stewed rabbit with prim stabs of his fork and knife.

We had convened for dinner about an hour after I’d lain down. Thanks to the wolf howls, which had grown into a nightmare chorus, I hadn’t slept a wink. Tiredness and anger now growled inside me. Before I could respond to Bertrand’s “amateur” dig, James clapped his hands once.

“Well,” he said cheerily. “Party of three, then?”

We all turned to Flor. With her sultry eyes, pouting lips, and sheen of shoulder-length black hair, she was hard not to jaw-drop over. But I saw what James meant about her mercenary quality. It wasn’t just in her black tank top and cargo pants, but also in the flat, almost groaning way she spoke.

“I am of the same mind as Bertrand,” she said, dropping a gnawed bone onto her plate. “As much as I hate to admit it.”

I looked around in exasperation. The restaurant was an older couple’s home, three tables pushed into a dining room and adorned with sooty plastic flowers. In a back kitchen, pots clinked and water gurgled. Despite that we had the place to ourselves, I lowered my voice.

“Look,” I said. “What I’m proposing will entail some compromise, yes. But it gives us the best chance of reaching Dolhasca. Attempt it alone and there’s a chance we’ll not only fail to find the monastery, but end up as wolf food.”

Bertrand sniffed. “It sounds like the American is afraid.”

Heat flashed over my face. “And you sound like a—”

“I asked around after our chat earlier,” James interrupted. “Everson’s concerns about the wolves are to be taken seriously. The history of the region is peppered with attacks on villagers, some of them fatal. Even the hunters don’t dare venture into the deep forest anymore. The roaming packs have little fear of humans, it seems. And they are especially aggressive at night.” Like everything else, he delivered the dire news with an almost buoyant air.

“Tales,” Bertrand decided.

“And what makes you the expert?” I was struggling not to rise and smack the haughty look from his face.

He touched his napkin to his lips and took another half minute to chew and swallow. “I was educated at your Harvard University, an overpriced, overrated institution, if ever there was. I completed my doctoral work at the Sorbonne in Paris, where I have been a full professor since. My publications are extensive—perhaps you’ve read my tome on medieval philosophy? I have won two book awards and am presently up for a third. And I am *constantly* being asked to lecture at prestigious conferences and universities.” He looked pointedly at James. “Last month I turned down an invitation from Oxford.”

“Thanks for the curriculum vitae,” I said, “but I missed the part where you slayed wild animals.”

Bertrand went to work on his potatoes as though he hadn’t heard me.

“Maybe the American is right,” Flor said. “Maybe we should stick together until we reach the monastery.”

I pushed my upturned palms toward her. “Thank you.”

“But once there,” she continued, “we will need to decide how to apportion the spoils.”

Apportion? Spoils? I drew my hands back. “We’re not looters, for God’s sake. We’re researchers.” A slanting look in Flor’s eyes made me hesitate. “Wait, you are a researcher, aren’t you?”

“I was just testing you,” Flor said. “And what I am is none of your business.”

Ouch. “Well, if we’re going to join forces, I think James and I need to know what you’re doing here.”

“Good luck, my friend.” James chuckled. “Flor and I have danced around the question a few times this week, haven’t we, love?”

Flor narrowed her eyes at him.

I decided not to press her, lest she change her mind about joining our party. Sharp-tongued or not, I didn’t like the thought of her attempting the journey alone. Plus, her presence strengthened our numbers.

“All right,” I said. “So that’s three. Bertrand? Last chance.”

He snorted and pushed himself back from his half-finished plate. “I

would just as soon join the Three Stooges." He slapped a pair of bills on the table and, donning his slicker and rain hat, strode from the restaurant. It wasn't until he was gone that I saw he had underpaid.

James looked from the closing door to Flor and me. "So," he said with a happy sigh. "What time shall we be off?"

"The weather is scheduled to improve around noon tomorrow," Flor said. "We should reach the monastery late the following day. If you two do not slow me down."

I slid James a sidelong smirk. "Yeah, we'll try to keep up."

He grinned back. "Well, I do like the sound of only spending one night in the forest each way."

"And I have an idea for some wolf repellent," I said.

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5

Flor came down to the breakfast table the next morning as James and I were finishing up. Her grunted response to our greetings suggested she wasn't a morning person. That didn't stop her stray hair and sleepy face from playing games with my imagination though. I coughed into a fist.

"The Frenchman is gone," she stated, ripping a chunk of bread from the loaf and slathering it with butter.

"Gone for a walk?" I asked. "Or *gone* gone."

"He has taken everything with him." The chunk disappeared into her mouth, and she chewed morosely.

"I heard him moving about early this morning," James said. "It seems he's set out on his own, the poor sod."

"Yeah, to beat us there," I grumbled. "Let's just hope we don't arrive to a fortified monastery." Though I wouldn't have put something like that past Bertrand, concern for his safety moved through me. I reminded myself that we had warned him, that he was a grown man.

As for *our* safety…

"If you'll excuse me," I said, standing from the table. "The pension owner gave me kitchen privileges for the next hour, and there's something I need to cook."

"Then it looks like I'll have this lovely fount of conversation all to myself," James said, cutting his sparkling eyes to Flor. She stopped chewing long enough to glower at him.

Geez. Even *that* look on her was amazing.

I stumbled into a chair as I left the room.

SINCE I WAS A YOUNG BOY, my head barely as high as Nana's hip, cooking had fascinated me. Combining disparate ingredients. Getting the proportions just right. Adding energy in the form of heat. All to end up with something whose whole was greater—or at least tastier—than the sum of its parts. And Nana's meals were some of the tastiest

I'd ever had.

That process, that *alchemy* I suppose you could call it, still impressed me.

I placed a cast-iron pot of water onto the gas stove. From the refrigerator, I pulled out a large bag of Romanian hot peppers I'd picked up at the local grocer. I pounded the pale-green peppers with the flat side of a butcher knife, releasing the juice and seeds, and scraped the mess into the pot. Finding the pension's black pepper, I ground it liberally into the steaming mixture.

James arrived twenty minutes later, as I was funneling the final dregs of the pepper spray between three spray bottles.

"Ah, your wolf repellent, I presume?"

"I made it extra strong, so be extra careful." I screwed on the plastic nozzles and handed him a bottle. "It so much as touches your skin, you'll think you're under a fire-ant attack, so you definitely don't want to get any in your eyes. A wolf's eyes are fine."

Flor appeared from behind James and claimed her bottle. She smirked as she wrapped her fingers around the plastic trigger. "They are cute," she remarked.

"Cute?" I'd been hoping for badass. "Just watch where you point it."

Her lips straightened as she lowered the bottle to her side. "We need to set out."

"But it's still dreadful," James said, lowering his head to the window to be sure.

Flor's dark eyes fixed on mine. "What you said about Bertrand wanting to reach the monastery before us. It disturbs me."

"Why?" I asked.

She peered over a shoulder, as though the man might be standing behind her, and then stepped close enough for me to feel her heat.

"Because he is not who he claims to be."

WE SET OUT AN HOUR LATER, tromping up a muddy road that led from the village into the foothills. Families paused in their field work to stare at us through the gray rain, their wan faces impossible to read. At a final farmhouse, I caught an elderly woman making the sign of the cross before withdrawing from her dark window and closing the shutters.

Okay. That wasn't creepy or anything.

I jogged every few paces to keep up with Flor, and I noticed James doing the same. In her black combat boots, she seemed intent on taking the forest by bloody conquest. In addition to her backpack, she

had set out with a titanium suitcase, declining James's and my offers to carry it for her. When we'd asked what was inside, she had given the one-word answer, "Equipment."

"So," I breathed, when I'd pulled even with her again. "Are you going to tell us about Bertrand now, or what?"

"He is a fraud," she said.

"Really? In what way?"

"What he told you last night?" She lowered her eyelids to half mast and affected a French accent. "'I am star professor. I am coveted speaker. I am genius.' It is all bullshit."

James laughed. "Not bad. And how did you discover that delightful gem?"

"Google," she said.

"Google?" I peered back down toward the remote village. "Was there an internet cafe I missed?"

"I have a satellite phone. I had someone look into his claims."

"Well," James said. "A spy after my own heart."

Flor ignored the comment, which gave me private pleasure. While James and I might not have been academic rivals, I sensed a growing competition between us for Flor's attention. A competition I was determined to win. "Bertrand teaches in Paris," she said. "But at what they call a *primaire*."

"Wait," I said. "He's an *elementary school* teacher?"

"So, his talk about Harvard and the Sorbonne?" James chimed in. "The book awards?"

"His only publication is a personal web page," Flor replied. "Pure drivel."

I snorted, unable to believe the man's audacity. So what was he doing here? Trying to garner recognition? To become the academic celebrity he'd already invented for himself?

"Wow," I remarked, "and he had the nerve to call *us* amateurs."

"That settles that, I suppose," James said. "But what about us, love?"

Flor's face whipped toward him. "What about you?"

"Well, surely you didn't stop with our good man Bertrand."

It took me a moment to understand what James was suggesting. Flor had her contact look into us as well.

"Do not worry," she snapped. "Your stories check out. So far."

And yours? I wanted to ask. But the road narrowed suddenly, the encroaching trees pressing us into a single file. Flor took the lead while I fell to the rear. Almost immediately, the temperature dropped several degrees, and the air thickened with humidity. A strange fatigue overcame me. But while I labored with each step, the other two marched ahead.

“Hey, American,” Flor called through the foliage. “Move your ass. We have many kilometers to cover.”

James turned around and tipped me a wink.

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The first wolf call arrived late that afternoon, a long, chilling cry.

Flor and James stopped to listen, allowing me time to catch up. I stood on shaky legs, searching the seams in the trees. The forest we were ascending through had grown darker and more knotted with each mile until it looked like something out of a Grimm's fairytale. My gaze darted toward the sound of a snapping branch. I thought I caught a figure duck behind a black tree, but the forest had been playing tricks on my eyes all afternoon.

"Sounded like quite a big one," James said of the cry. "Assertive, too."

"Yes, but it is far away," Flor said. "Kilometers. We need to keep going. Bertrand had a four-hour head start."

James consulted his GPS device. "We're making decent time, in any case."

"It could be better," Flor remarked, glancing over at me.

Her shirt hiked up as she turned, and I caught myself gawking at a glistening show of skin above her right hip. I was going on six months since my last girlfriend kicked me to the curb, and the yearning for that kind of companionship was starting to feel like a clinical condition. Maybe when I returned to New York I'd look into getting a cat. Something uncomplicated.

"How you holding up, mate?" James asked, slowing to match my pace.

"Fine." In fact, I was exhausted. "Hey, you've been talking to her most of the day," I said in a lowered voice and with a shot of envy. "Any insights into her motive for wanting to go to the monastery? Or why she's so hell bent on getting there ahead of Bertrand?"

"I'm afraid not. And if you intend on taking up the question with her again, I advise you to step carefully. She's a bit of a minefield, that one."

"So I've noticed." My gaze locked onto the titanium case swinging from her arm.

Before I could wonder aloud about its contents, James said, "The folklore in these parts should interest someone in your line of study. Did you know they have a version of a werewolf called a *pricolici*?"

I ventured a glance at the dark forest behind us. “Is now really the best time?”

“Ooh, dreadful creatures,” he went on. “Fast, powerful, smart as humans, but nigh impossible to kill. And they don’t abide by the moon cycles as far as their wolf forms go. That’s a constant condition. As far as their temperaments?” He gave a knowing laugh. “The waxing moon is supposed to make them more blood thirsty. And I do believe we’re coming on a full moon this week.”

When another cycle of howling started, James’s eyes gleamed as though the wolves had just made his point for him.

“Thanks for that info,” I muttered.

While James trotted to catch up to Flor, I glanced around again, my anxiety needle trembling in the orange. Not that I believed in werewolves, or needed to—actual wolves were worrying enough. Then again, if magic could exist in our world, why not monsters? Because whatever I had witnessed from my grandfather’s closet that night had looked an awful lot like magic.

Magic I wasn’t supposed to have seen.

I STARED at Grandpa’s face, shock icing over my own. His hazel-blue eyes studied the blood welling from my finger, the lines around his mouth turning down. One hand clamped my wrist, but I was more concerned by his other hand. The one gripping a sword that, only seconds before, had been his walking cane. A sword he had just drawn across my finger faster than I could blink.

The wound began to sting, then burn, pulling a murmur from my lips.

His eyes snapped to mine. Hard Germanic eyes. “You should not hide up here.”

With those thick, accented words, the attic room seemed to take form again, everything returning from some gray haze. The antique desk, the crowded bookshelves, the old steamer trunk. Though I couldn’t see the closet I had been crouched inside, I could smell the stuffy coats behind me.

“How did you get in?” he demanded.

“Wh-what?”

“How did you enter my room?”

My gaze shifted to the door. No latching system. Not even a keyhole to peek through. But always locked. Through the dense wood, I had often picked up vibrations of muffled words, liturgical-like chants, and once, a high, chilling voice that sounded like nothing I’d ever heard. The voice gave me nightmares for a month. But it didn’t

keep me from coming back to listen.

"I-I opened the door."

"How?"

The word. There was a strange word Grandpa would utter every time he stood outside his attic door before he turned the knob. As though he were muttering a brusque greeting to someone.

"I said what you say."

His grip tightened on my wrist as he leaned closer. "And what do I say?"

"Apri—" I cleared my throat. *"Aprire."*

As had happened when I'd spoken the word earlier, a current passed through me, and a pressure in the room seemed to release, like when your ears popped after an airplane flight. Grandpa blinked twice. He peered at the door for a full minute, then closed his eyes and exhaled through his large nostrils, as though he had just arrived at a grave conclusion.

"You should not hide up here," he repeated, releasing my wrist and straightening. "You should not even be in here. Ever."

I pulled my hand toward my chest, wounded finger extended, tears standing in my eyes. "Okay."

I flinched when he reached down, but it was only to wipe the blood away with his large thumb. He uttered something as he ran the blood-smeared thumb up and down the flat of the sword before sliding it back into the cane. He strode to the door, his dark linen suit stiff on his tall frame.

I followed, casting wary glances at the trunk, silent now, and the bookshelves that held encyclopedias and reference books once more. Had I imagined everything?

"You are curious," Grandpa said as he opened the door for me. "But you must not be foolish. Things heard cannot be unheard. Things seen unseen. Things spoken unspoken. And it is this last that is most important for those of our blood."

"Yes, sir," I said, not knowing what in the hell he was talking about.

He stared at me sternly for another moment, then dismissed me with a nod.

I pattered down the narrow staircase, scared and confused. I had been in Nana and Grandpa's care ever since my mother had died, which was ever since I could remember, and neither had ever hurt me. And on my birthday?

Arriving in my room, I closed the door behind me with a foot, blind to the opened presents spread over my bed. *He sliced my finger,* I thought. I was afraid to look, already anticipating the flayed fat pad, maybe even a bloody knot of bone. The slice had felt that deep.

But when I looked down, all I saw was a faint white line.

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The wolf calls grew in number with the fading light. They volleyed back and forth, as though several had picked up our scent and were telling the others. When an especially loud cry rent the air, I jogged to catch up to James and Flor.

"I say we make camp," I blurted. "Build a nice fire, set up some kind of watch." My heart beat hard in my chest as I pointed off to the right. "There's a flat spot over there, plenty of fallen limbs."

James nodded his approval, then turned to Flor.

She looked at her watch and sighed. "Fine."

I went to work on the fire while James and Flor set up their tents. Using hand sanitizer as starter fuel, I got a decent-sized blaze going before dusk became full dark. After gathering up a reserve of limbs to last the night, the three of us ate our dinners around the fire. I noticed Flor didn't have my homemade repellent at hand.

"Where's your bottle?" I asked.

"I left it at the pension."

"On purpose?"

"The wolves will not come close to the fire."

Deeper in the forest, above her right shoulder, a golden pair of eyes flashed and disappeared. And they weren't the only ones. More sets of eyes winked in and out of the trees, like coins from a dark well. "Better rethink that logic," I said, "because they're already here."

I shot to my feet, fingers wrapping the trigger of my spray bottle—which suddenly felt puny to the task. James rose with his bottle as well, but more in curiosity than fear, it seemed.

Flor remained seated. "That is as close as they will come."

"Don't know about that, love," James said. "At least one of them sounds determined to make a fireside appearance."

I turned to where James was aiming his bottle, away from the flashing of eyes. Then I heard it too: the sound of something large running through wet leaves, coming straight for us. A moment later, a shadow broke into the light.

Squinting, I rapid-fired the plastic trigger.

Shouts went up. Too late, I saw the figure wasn't a wolf, but a person. The aerosol of pepper spray that enveloped the man sent him

shrieking to the ground, hands to his eyes. I noted the hair flapping from his slipping hood, and then the lumpy pack on the man's back.

"My God, is that Bertrand?" James asked.

If there was any doubt, his stuffy voice removed it. "You animals!" Bertrand cried. "What kind of poison have you put into my eyes?"

"Just stop rubbing them," I said with the annoyance of someone who's just had the crap needlessly scared from him. I hurried to my pack and returned with a bottle of milk, which I'd stowed in the event of an accident.

"What are you doing?" Bertrand sputtered, as the milk splashed over his face.

"Neutralizing the pepper, you idiot. Now hold still and let it flush everything out."

He stopped slapping and writhing long enough to blink the milk into his bloodshot eyes.

"There," I said, recapping the bottle with a sigh. "Give it a few seconds."

James offered him a handkerchief, which Bertrand snatched away and used to mop his face and then pinch into the corners of his eyes. I noticed Flor had remained on her side of the fire the whole time, a smile slanting her lips. My face flushed as I imagined how slap-sticky we must have looked. But the commotion must also have scared the wolves away, because I could no longer see their eyes.

I turned back to Bertrand, who was pushing himself to his knees.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I said, "but was that you fleeing for your life?" I was still bristling over the American-is-afraid jab. Not to mention his whole intellectual façade. "It couldn't have had anything to do with those wolf *tales*, as you called them last night, could it?"

"Don't be preposterous," he replied stiffly, gaining his feet. "I was preparing my own camp over there when I saw your fire. It made no sense to pass the night alone, so I decided to join you."

"Which involved running here at full speed."

"Walk? Run? What does it matter how I arrived?" he spat. "Though I am beginning to see my mistake."

I studied his black slicker and lined it up with the shadows I'd glimpsed earlier, the snapping of branches, the feeling of being watched. "How long have you been following us?"

He blinked and straightened. "How *dare* you suggest—"

"Oh, spare us the dramatics," I said. "That's why you set out early, isn't it? Not to get a head start, but to hide until we'd passed and then tail us. You don't know the precise location of the monastery. Your plan was to let us lead you there and then run ahead and claim the discovery and anything inside for yourself. It was all going along just hunky-dory until the wolves turned up. And then your little scheme

didn't seem so cunning, did it?"

"You have been watching too many stupid American movies," he muttered, even as he shot nervous glances into the forest.

"Very good," James said, stepping between us. "The important thing is that we're all safe. Now, how should we divide up the shifts?"

"After all this excitement, you boys need your rest," Flor said. "I will take the first."

"And I the second," Bertrand announced. "Which leaves you to take the third, and you the fourth." He pointed to me and James in turn, as though we were his teaching assistants.

"Can you believe this guy?" I said, anger climbing my neck. "You're not even a prof—"

"That will work just fine," James interrupted. After Bertrand had given a self-satisfied nod and begun unpacking his shelter, James guided me a few steps away. "Better he doesn't know we're onto him, hmm?"

I narrowed my eyes at Bertrand. I had never been able to stand officious jerks, especially lying ones.

"And why's that?" I asked.

"Well, if he suspects we know his true story, he's likely to behave more carefully, cover his tracks. Then we may never learn what he's doing here. We keep a sly eye on him, and sooner or later he'll slip up."

I nodded reluctantly. "And Flor?"

"Oh, she's on board. We had the same chat earlier."

"No, I mean, shouldn't we be keeping an eye on her, as well?"

"Why, you're quite right," James said.

I noticed that ever since we'd arrived at the campsite, her titanium case had never been more than an arm's length away from her. I nodded at it now. "I'll use my shift to see if I can get a peek at whatever's she's carrying. Maybe it'll tip us off to what she's doing here."

"Careful, mate," he said. "Minefield, remember?"

"Yeah, I'm used to those."

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I was awakened by muttered curses and red light against my eyelids, growing brighter. I had fallen asleep to a modest campfire, an ample reserve of wood stacked beside it. Now I squinted my eyes open to a furious blaze. One onto which Bertrand was dumping the final thick branches.

"What in the hell are you doing?" I hissed, kicking away my sleeping bag and unzipping my fly net. "You're using up all the fuel!"

Bertrand acknowledged me with a tight glance before wiping off his hands and sweeping his gaze over the forest. When I focused past him, all the fight fell out of me. The wolves were back and crowding against the boundary between firelight and darkness, flashing eyes set in long, gray faces. There were more of them than earlier, and whether it was some trick of light, they looked like small bulls.

"They were closer before I fed the blaze," Bertrand said.

"That's genius, professor, but we're out of wood now."

I scanned our campsite, but we had cleared it of branches. The only fuel lay beyond the ring of predators, who watched silently. No more pack to call. They were all here.

I flinched when the fire snapped behind me and stove in slightly. As the orb of light shrank, the wolves inched nearer. The closest ones were only thirty feet away.

"Everyone up!" I called, rustling James's tent and Flor's tarp. "We've got company."

James emerged first and looked around sleepily. "Well, I'd say."

"Get your repellent," I told him.

"I do applaud your ingenuity," he said, arriving beside me. He peered from our bottles back to the wolves. "However, it looks as if the current advantage lies with our furry friends."

I shook my bottle to stir up the pepper dregs. "You saw what this stuff did to the professor. It doesn't take much. I say we release a few sprays into the wind, enough to warn them away."

"Or more likely provoke them into an attack," Bertrand said from behind us.

"Funny coming from a man who said they were harmless," I growled.

James turned to me. “Bertrand does make a case.”

I checked my watch and did the math. “The sun doesn’t come up for another five hours. Our fire, whose exhaustion the brilliant professor here saw fit to hasten, isn’t going to last another two.”

The fire stove in again, and the wolves inched forward a foot. Several snapped at one another for position, fangs bright and lethal in the firelight.

“Hmm,” James said. “I see your point.”

We raised our spray bottles.

“Don’t,” Bertrand warned, his voice as taut as a guy wire. “They will attack.”

“Three squirts,” I said to James. “You fan yours out a little that way. I’ll aim a little more this way.”

“Got it.”

“On my countdown,” I said, my hand trembling. “Three… two…”

“No!” Bertrand leapt between us and brought his fist down on my forearm. The bottle fell to the ground. James’s grunt told me Bertrand had struck him as well. “I will not be a victim of your stupidity!”

He kicked my bottle away and wrestled with James for his.

I turned to where the bottle rolled to a stop, on the verge of the firelight. One of the wolves leaned forward to sniff it. Was it a wolf? Its snout seemed too thick, too blunt, teeth hooking over its lower jaw. And its front paw splayed out like a bear’s instead of a canine’s, ending in large claws. No wonder the driver’s scars had looked like the work of a grizzly. James’s account of the Romanian werewolf, the *pricolici,* flashed through my mind.

The beast bared its fangs at the bottle, then up at me, as though assigning blame for the poison, before drawing back into the shadows again.

Behind me, James spoke through clenched teeth, “You’re going about this rather roughly.”

I looked to find him and Bertrand still grappling for the bottle. The barks and snarls from the ring of wolves rose in pitch. I hooked an arm around Bertrand’s throat and tried to pull him away.

“Stop fighting, *goddammit*,” I hissed in his ear. “You’re exciting them.”

“You are the ones … exciting them,” Bertrand grunted, pistoning a sharp elbow into my ribs.

A single ragged cry went up and I felt, more than heard, the circle of wolves collapse. I released Bertrand and turned in time to meet the beast plowing into me. Two hundred pounds of brawn and thick, wet hair drove me onto my back, foul breath breaking against my face. The beast strained against my forearm, which I’d managed to brace against its throat. Lips drew from a double set of fanged teeth as its

dense brow collapsed over furious eyes. Eyes that, save for their deep yellow irises, appeared almost human.

I was struggling against its straining neck, and losing, when a tight explosion pierced the tumult.

Something hot sprayed my face. The wolf on top of me crashed to its side and then tore at the ground to right itself. More explosions sounded, and the wolves fled, one dragging a blood-drenched hind leg.

I thrashed to my feet, looking from the disappearing wolves to the source of the explosions. Across the fire, Flor stood holding what looked like a military-grade rifle. She scanned the woods in a three-hundred-sixty-degree arc, smoke drifting from the barrel. When she faced me once more, she said, "You wanted to know what was in the case?"

My shocked gaze fell to the open titanium container at her feet, the black foam bed inside designed to hold the disassembled rifle.

"Wow," I said, wiping wolf blood from my face. "Good planning."

I turned to find James climbing from the ground, excitement coloring his pink cheeks. Bertrand, who had fallen to his back nearby, continued to slap the air as though the wolves were still attacking.

"Are either of you injured?" I asked.

James gave his spray bottle a light toss. "Your repellent worked a charm, my friend," he said, catching it again. "Got two right in the old peepers before Flor here came to the rescue."

"Bertrand?" I asked, stooping beside him.

He had stopped thrashing and was grasping his ankle in both hands now. Blood glistened between his fingers. "I told you not to excite them," he hissed through his crooked teeth. "Why didn't you imbeciles listen? And my food bag! They have taken my food bag!"

I shoved down my annoyance and made him move his hands. The gash was bad, but more worrying was the swelling. One of the wolves had gotten its jaws around him pretty good. I raised my face to James and Flor. "Ankle looks ugly. Could be broken. Should we draw straws to see who takes him back?"

"I cannot," Flor said, not bothering to elaborate.

James rubbed his neck. "And I'm afraid this is my one crack to graduate."

I leaned my hands against my thighs and sighed. I could ask James to locate the *Book of Souls*, transcribe as much as he could, and mail the notes to me back in the States. I would compensate him, of course. But man, to be this close…

"All right," I said to Bertrand. "Looks like it's you and me. We'll head down in the morning."

He shoved me away. "Nonsense! I will not go back and have these

two ruin what may be the most important finding of our lifetimes." He struggled to his knees, then to one foot. But when he attempted to step with his injured leg, he screamed and fell to the ground again.

"Would you look at yourself?" I said. "You can't even walk."

"It is only a sprain. Splint it and you will see. Tomorrow, I will be ready to travel."

"Your bag's gone," I reminded him. "You have no food."

Grunting, Bertrand crawled on hands and knees to his tent, zipping it closed behind him.

"Just what we need," I muttered. "Dead weight."

"Well," James said cheerily. "Shall we gather some more wood, then get a little shut eye before we're off again?"

"I will take the remaining shifts," Flor declared, rifle propped over her shoulder.

Neither James nor I argued.

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We set out the next morning, Bertrand cursing with every hopping step. We had fashioned a splint for him using cut-up sections of my backpack's interior frame and some sports tape Flor happened to be carrying.

"You doing all right?" I called back to him.

"Do not worry about me," he snapped, leaning on his branches-cum-crutches. "I know the way."

Sure you do, prof.

I imagined the injury had thrown a wrench into whatever he'd been planning. On the flip side, the injury meant one less worry for the rest of us. Far easier to keep tabs on a crippled fraud than an able-bodied one.

Late in the afternoon, James signaled to us. "It should be just over the pass."

Thank God. The dread of camping in the forest again had been building like a migraine. There was still the return journey to the village, but I'd worry about that in a few days.

Behind me, I could hear Bertrand grunting to catch up, probably hoping to overtake us, but James and Flor were too far ahead. Before long, their voices rose in excitement. When I arrived at the mountain pass, I saw why. Where the trees began to thin, a sizeable stone structure took shape against a cliff face. Exhilaration surged through me.

Dolhasca, the forgotten monastery.

"Wait!" Bertrand called after us. "We should enter by seniority!"

I ignored him and picked my way down toward the others. The large monastery had been built like a fortress, tall stone walls with a crenellated tower at one corner. The rear of the building ended at the cliff face, as though the mountain had sheared it in half.

"Seems we aren't the first ones here," James said when I arrived beside him.

He was examining a doorway that looked to have been bricked over but later broken down, toppled stones cast to one side. I tilted a nearby stone with a shoe, revealing a deep pocket of earth underneath.

“This happened a while ago,” I said.

“Looters,” Flor announced, in what sounded like disdain. “They are everywhere.”

“Well, let’s just hope they left the manuscripts alone.”

“You don’t sound very optimistic,” James said.

“Because I’m not.” I donned my headlamp. “The manuscripts would have been worth a fortune on the black market.” And if they *had* been sold on the black market, I could kiss the *Book of Souls* goodbye. I would never be able to track it down in the dark network of buyers and sellers.

Flor stepped forward. “I wonder if they are the same ones who wrote this.” I followed her squinting gaze to a message scrawled beside the door in what looked like charcoal. *“Prekliaty.”*

“It’s the Slovak word for *cursed*,” I said.

“A warning?” James frowned. “Seems odd for looters to leave a public service announcement.”

“Or maybe the message was intended to keep looters away,” I said. “As a scare tactic.” I looked from the message back to the busted-up stones. “Though a lot of good it did.”

“Enough talk.” Flor snapped on a headlamp and stepped through the opening.

“Wait,” came Bertrand’s voice, his head appearing above the pass. “I don’t have a light!”

James filed in after Flor, and I took up the rear. We soon found ourselves on a covered walk that framed a stone-riddled courtyard. The open space had probably been a garden at one time, and it wasn’t hard to imagine robed monks strolling along its paths.

“Let’s split up,” I said, peering down the covered walk to our right and left, picking out the shadows of doorways. “We can take a quick inventory of what’s here before Bertrand arrives.”

James nodded. “I’ll search the tower, if you and Flor want to begin down here.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “And Flor, we’re just looking right now. Not taking, okay?”

“Bite me,” she snapped and marched away.

“Well, good luck everyone,” James said merrily before departing.

I set off in the opposite direction as Flor, my ego smarting from her parting words. What was it about me that put women off? My sarcasm? My face? As I shone my light overhead, the questions dissolved from my thoughts. Though the monastery had appeared forbidding from the outside, handsome stonework adorned the interior, including the walkway’s vaulted ceiling. Romanesque pillars stood every fifteen feet or so, though several had toppled.

Not a bad place to hang out for a few days.

I shot my beam into doorways, illuminating what looked to have been prayer cells and former dormitories, all empty now save for scattered rubble and fallen timber beams. In the wall opposite the one we'd entered through, an arched doorway opened into the cliff face. From either the chill air or my own foreboding, my arms broke out in fleshy bumps.

I ducked into the doorway and soon emerged into a room at the far end of a corridor. My beam found a gruesome monster's face. Stifling a yell, I swung the beam over and hit the creature's twin. I staggered backwards, nearly falling.

I hesitated, my heart slamming—and then let out a shaky laugh.

Gargoyles.

I walked up to the devilish works of stone, the pair crouched on pedestals that flanked a descending staircase. The details were impressive, down to the fangs that extended to the gargoyle's knobby knees. The statues seemed at odds with the rest of the monastery, but I was more concerned about the staircase. My headlamp wavered into the deep darkness.

As much as I hated the word, I had a *phobia* of being underground, a condition that made it feel as if someone was sitting on my chest. Already, I was struggling to inhale a full breath.

I was debating whether to descend when, on a lintel above the steps, I caught sight of a chiseled word:

SCRIPTORIUM

The library!

In my excitement, I almost called for James before realizing I couldn't do so without alerting Flor. Bertrand, too, if he had made it inside by now. Still not knowing their designs on the texts, I couldn't take any chances—especially with Flor bearing a high-powered rifle.

Her echoing voice sounded from the courtyard. "Everson? Where are you?"

Before my phobia could gain the upper hand, I hurried down the steps, through cold currents of air and a growing odor of what smelled like garbage. I was almost to the bottom when my beam illuminated the smell's source. Two bodies stretched across the stairs while a third rested on the library floor, face up. Flashlight parts lay scattered, broken plastic glinting around metal tubes.

I clapped a hand over my mouth and braced myself against the wall. They were the first corpses I had ever seen. When my heart settled, I stole up to the closer bodies. Faded clothing draped what remained of them, their dried skin vacuum-sealed to bone, skulls wispy with hair. From up the stairwell, footfalls echoed, and a pair of

lights swelled into view.

"Down here," I wheezed.

JAMES SQUATTED beside the body on the library floor, lips frowning. "Bruising over the face and torso, like the others. Broken limbs. Crushed skull." He pinched a faded red sleeve. "Judging by the attire, I'd say gypsies."

"And look at this." My headlamp illuminated a black dagger with a shattered blade.

"Looters," Flor decided for the second time that afternoon. "I found a room with their things. Bedding, pickaxes, backpacks."

"Anything in the packs?" I asked hopefully.

"Just clothes and extra batteries, some rotten food."

I felt my optimism crumple into a wad as I worked out what had likely happened. "Someone in their party must have murdered the other three and then made off with the loot. Probably the manuscripts, given that it occurred down here." I eyed the rifle slung across Flor's back, wondering if that had been *her* intention. She seemed to know a lot about looting.

"No. There is bedding for four upstairs," she said. "And there are still four bags."

James stood and shone his light around. "Suggesting there must be a fourth body somewhere."

"Or the fourth person fled," I suggested.

"Fled what?" Flor snapped.

I was thinking of the scrawled message outside the front door—*cursed*—almost certain now the fourth looter had left it after fleeing whatever had killed his companions. But I didn't say anything.

"Well, we're here," James pointed out with a smile. "What say we have a look about?"

The library was just large enough for us to spread apart while keeping an eye on one another, which we all seemed to be doing. Though whether for each other's safety or from suspicion, I couldn't tell. Probably both. Pillars and empty shelves loomed in and out of view. I toed through the dust on the floor, turning up small brass nails and, in a far corner, a leather cover.

The three of us met in the rear of the room where an archway stood over another stairwell. James was leaning toward a stone in the wall beside the opening, running a finger over a faint engraving.

"Vault of forbidden texts," I translated from Latin.

"This is it," Flor declared. She started down, James and I following closely.

“It’s funny, mate,” James whispered to me. “If the texts are forbidden, I would have expected a thick door, a hidden wall, something to keep people from nosing about. But there were no signs the stairwell had been broken into.”

I nodded. That was bothering me too. We arrived in a lower chamber, passing through what felt like a chilly curtain of energy. Our lights sliced around a cylindrical room the size of a gazebo. Deep shelves had been cut into the stone wall—all of them empty.

“Mierda,” Flor cursed.

“This *is* a disappointment,” James agreed.

Disappointment? My heart felt as though it had been pulled from my chest and set adrift. With no living family to speak of, the *Book of Souls* was to have been my line to Grandpa, to who he was. Not the bull about him working in insurance, but who he had *really* been. Why he spoke in unusual tongues. Why strange forces held his door closed. Why things in his room talked and changed. And why, on the night he had caught me in his study, he had spoken with such gravity about the responsibilities of “those of our blood.”

“Do you hear that?” Flor asked.

James and I followed her dark gaze to the ceiling. A moment later, I heard it too. Clunking footsteps, crossing the floor of the main library. Too heavy to be Bertrand’s.

I swallowed dryly. “Were either of you expecting company?”

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Flor signaled for us to kill our lights. When we did, a coal-black darkness collapsed against us. In the absence of sight, my hearing sharpened. I could make out Flor's and James's shallow breaths, and one floor up, those heavy footfalls, coming nearer.

Two sets of them.

Fabric whispered—Flor sliding her rifle around to her front. "We are too vulnerable down here," she whispered. "We need to go up, see who it is."

I felt Flor edge past me, her foot scuffing lightly onto the bottom step. I swam an arm after her until my hand met the stairwell's cold wall. I ascended slowly, aware of Flor's progress ahead and James's behind, glad as hell we had all come together.

But who were we dealing with? Fellow researchers? More looters?

Not realizing the stairs had ended, I stepped awkwardly and stumbled against Flor's back. Holding her taut shoulders, I stared around the darkness as James bumped up beside me. I had expected to see flashlight beams or candles out ahead of us, but I couldn't even hear the footsteps anymore.

"One o'clock," Flor whispered.

I released her shoulders and listened. "I don't hear anything."

"Fingers on your light switches." Flor's quiet voice hummed with tension. "Now!"

Our lights blew open the darkness at the same time. And there they were—the frigging gargoyles from upstairs. With the sound of grinding stone, their heads swiveled toward us.

"Mother f—"

Explosions from Flor's rifle obliterated the rest of my mind-blown expletive. Sparks flew from the charging monstrosities and bullets caromed, one whining past my head. But I couldn't move.

"Spread out!" Flor called.

With the gargoyles almost on top of us, something kick-started in my brain. I took off to the left, weaving around pillars, my headlamp jostling madly. *Okay, this makes no sense. No flipping sense whatsoever.* When I turned to check on the others, one of the gargoyles rose over me.

I threw myself from the path of its descending fist and landed in an awkward roll, clunking several times over my backpack. The gargoyle's fist cracked into stone behind me, shaking the library's foundation.

Perhaps for my academic background, I had a bad habit of trying to make sense of situations that required a pure fight-or-flight response. But as I scrabbled to my feet, my mind was connecting the curtain of energy in the vault to the *cursed* warning to the bludgeoned looters. Had our presence downstairs triggered some sort of alarm? One that animated the gargoyles? I had seen some strange stuff in Grandpa's study, but this was taking it to a whole new level.

I stumbled backwards, my light swimming over the advancing gargoyle. Beyond the creature, Flor's and James's own lights lashed around. Rifle bursts collided with shouting, but I couldn't tell how my travel companions were faring.

Something rammed my back hard enough to rattle my teeth. I pawed to both sides to find I had not only backed into a wall, but a corner. The gargoyle stalked toward me, spreading its arms to prevent my escape.

"Hey, can we talk about this?" I stammered.

The gargoyle reached down and grasped my head like a basketball. The crushing pressure registered as bright lights behind my eyes. I didn't know what kind of pounds per square inch we were talking, but it had to be testing my skull's limits. Grasping the gargoyle's wrist in both hands, I pulled myself up and kicked. Its stone stomach stopped my heel cold. The gargoyle responded with a knee that collapsed my own belly. Then it flung me away.

I wrapped my head with my arms, sure I was going to splat into a pillar. Instead, I hit the ground pack-first and flopped onto my stomach. I lay stunned. Unable to move or breathe. The rifle bursts had stopped, and I couldn't hear Flor or James. Just the gargoyle, its stone steps cracking toward me.

You're not exciting enough, my last girlfriend had said. *All you ever do is read,* she'd said.

I winced and raised my face, the weak headlamp finding the creature's knees. Beyond, I glimpsed one of the battered and dried-out corpses on the steps. God, I didn't want to end up like those guys. I lifted my light to the gargoyle's horned snout and narrow chiseled eyes. I didn't suppose it would do any good to explain I was a researcher and not a looter.

The gargoyle arrived in front of me and drew back a leg.

"Hey…" I rasped, holding an arm out. "Easy there…"

Its stone lips trembled from snarling teeth. I curled into a ball, anticipating the impact of the organ-crushing kick.

Only it didn't arrive. After another second, I peeked between my forearms. The gargoyle was frozen in place, balanced on one leg. Then, very slowly, it began to tip to the side. Its eventual collision with the floor snapped an arm at the elbow and shattered both fangs.

I scrambled to my feet, expecting the gargoyle to rise again and resume its attack, but whatever force had possessed it moments before seemed to have broken apart like the statue.

"Well," James said, appearing from behind a pillar, "maybe not as skilled a toss as your cowboys, but it seems I lassoed the bugger all the same." I had no idea what he was talking about until he crouched and fingered something around the gargoyle's neck.

I took a tentative step closer. "What is that?"

"A rock salt necklace," he replied. "Before you arrived in town, a villager talked Flor and me into buying a pair. Claimed it would dispel evil magic. They didn't seem to be doing much in our packs, so I got the idea to throw one around his partner over there. I'll be damned if it didn't work."

I turned my head to where, across the room, Flor's light illuminated the other gargoyle, also toppled.

James clapped my shoulder. "Seems I got to yours just in time."

"No kidding," I said. "Thanks."

"The American is okay?" Flor asked, striding up to us.

"I'll live." When I coughed, pain stabbed through my ribs. I nodded at a spot on her upper arm slick with blood. "What about you?"

She shrugged it off. "A bullet graze."

I turned to James. "And you?"

"Took a slight knock to the head. Nothing a little whiskey can't cure."

"Good, because we have work to do." Maybe it was pain endorphins, but my various injuries seemed to be having a sedating, focusing effect. Manuscripts or not, we still had to survive the night. "Three things, specifically. Number one, we need to block the front door. I don't know whether the wolves would try to venture in here, but I don't see why they wouldn't. Two, we need to get those pickaxes Flor saw upstairs and break the gargoyles apart. Whatever the rock salt is doing may not last, and I don't think any of us want a rematch." I glanced at Flor, who was watching me intently. "And three—"

A stuffy voice echoed from upstairs. "Where in the *hell* has everyone gone?"

"Three," I repeated, "we need to keep an eye on Bertrand."

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James volunteered to pickaxe the gargoyles while Flor and I dealt with the front door. Bertrand, who remained convinced the texts were somewhere in the monastery, went limping off with a make-shift torch in search of them. I let him, figuring it would keep him out of the way for the time being. It was the nighttime, when the rest of us would be sleeping, that he concerned me the most.

I grunted to the top of the stones Flor and I had piled against the timber we'd stood over the entrance. Ribs protesting where the gargoyle had driven its knee, I hefted a chunk of fallen pillar into the final space.

I exhaled. "There."

Flor blew a strand of hair from her eyes and assessed the pile, fists on her hips. "Now we use the rest of the timber to brace it."

I nodded wearily and climbed back down. Together, we stood a scavenged beam on end, wedged it against a fallen pillar set back from the entrance, and then lowered the other end against the piled-up stones at an angle. Opposite me, Flor seemed to be handling the work with relative ease. I caught myself admiring the slender muscles along her arms.

"So…" I said as we lifted another beam, "now that there are no texts … want to tell me what you're doing here?"

"You do not give up, do you?"

Her voice seemed to carry a flirtatious note of challenge. I peeked past the wooden beam to find the black eyes beneath her thick brows fixed on mine. A small smile teased her lips.

"On some questions, no," I said.

"What difference does it make why I am here? Like you say, there are no texts."

"Maybe I just want to trust you."

Far away, a wolf's howl went up. Flor looked from the sound to me, eyebrow cocked. "I saved you from them, didn't I?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it. She had a point.

With a cool dusky wind circling the courtyard, we set the final beam in place. Flor dusted off her hands and came forward until our legs were almost touching. "What is it you really want, Everson?"

I didn't realize I had been bracing my ribs on the right side until her hand slid under my sweat-damp shirt and over the ache. For someone who behaved with such dispassion in the face of danger, her palm blazed with heat. My body stiffened, then molded against her touch.

"I work for collectors," she said with a sigh. "A group with an interest in ancient texts and artifacts."

"Like a museum?" I asked, struggling to hold her face in focus. God, she felt good.

"No, they are private collectors." Her palm shifted to another sore spot. "They read the same article as you, James, and Bertrand. They hired me to see if the texts were here and to keep anyone from taking them."

I fought for a little analytical distance. Her secrecy, her military-grade rifle, her composure—and, yes, her terminal good looks. They all seemed consistent with someone who contracted out her services to the highest bidders. Which explained why she had been so concerned about Bertrand arriving here first.

"Were *you* supposed to take the texts?" I asked pointedly.

"I was only to keep them safe until the group could negotiate with the Romanian government for their purchase."

"Purchase?" Given their rarity, the texts would have cost a fortune. "Who is this group?"

"I am paid to do a job, not ask questions." She pressed closer. "Are you happy now?"

"Almost." I leaned toward her lips, a man anticipating his first taste of water after a six-month drought. I half expected a recoil and a sharp slap, but Flor's eyelids softened. Her chin tilted upward.

"I daresay, the wolves will have a devil of a time getting through that."

Flor and I jerked apart. A moment later, James appeared along the walkway, a pickaxe slung over one shoulder. *Awesome timing, mate.* He arrived beside us and looked the barricade up and down, nodding his approval. But when he turned to face us, his eyes were absent their usual joviality.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

He seemed to will his mouth into a smile. "Couldn't be better, mate." He clapped my shoulder with a little too much enthusiasm. "Hard work breaking up those gargoyles, but it's done."

Great. He had seen our near kiss, and now he was jealous. As if there wasn't already enough tension among the four of us.

"Where is Bertrand?" Flor asked.

We all peered around. A moment later, the Frenchman appeared at the far end of the courtyard. He had done away with his crutches and

was limp-hopping toward us, a sweaty sweep of hair dangling over his eyes.

"Where are they?" he demanded. "Where are the texts?"

"We told you," James said. "The library and vault were empty when we arrived."

"That is a *lie*!" He stopped in front of us, the muscles around his eyes trembling with anger. "You took them!" He pointed at Flor but swept his arm back and forth to implicate all of us.

I stepped forward. "You need to calm down, bud. No one took anything."

"But they are here," he said. "I can *feel* them."

Flor waved a dismissive hand. "You are crazy."

His eyes jerked around until they locked on our packs, which we'd set beside a pillar. He hopped over and began tugging at the zippers of Flor's pack. "We will see who is crazy."

James seized the scruff of his jacket. "It's not polite to root through other people's belongings, mate."

Bertrand flailed his arms around, catching James in the mouth. James recoiled, the back of a hand to his lower lip, then held out both fists in a classic boxer's stance. Before I could intervene, Flor was behind Bertrand, a black pistol jammed against the back of his head.

"Let go of my pack."

I rushed up, palms showing. "Hey, hey, hey. Let's all just take a few deep breaths here. Bertrand, put her pack down." From his stooped-over position, Bertrand grunted and released the pack. "Okay. Now Flor. Let's put the gun away, hm?" Her lip curled, but she stepped away, clicking on the safety and holstering the pistol in the back of her pants.

I lowered my hands carefully, as though any sudden movement could shatter the fragile peace.

"I am not sharing my food with him," Flor declared.

"Neither am I." James glared down at Bertrand. "The mad bastard bloodied my lip."

"I do not want the food of *rogues*," Bertrand spat back. "It will probably be poisoned."

"Guys, look," I said. "Like it or not, we're stuck with one another until we make it back to the village. We're going to have to figure out a way to get along. I mean, it would be a shame to have survived the wolves and gargoyles only to end up killing each other." I chuckled at my own joke, but no one else joined in.

"But I *know* you have the texts," Bertrand said to us through clenched teeth.

"Here," Flor snapped. She unzipped her pack and, its mouth open for all to see, shoveled her hand around the contents: wads of clothes,

a gas stove, metallic packets of food. “There, do you see? No texts, you crazy man.”

Bertrand’s lips pressed together.

To further dispel the tension, I opened my pack, too. While doing my own digging, my fingers encountered something cold and metallic. I withdrew a cone-shaped bullet, one that must have punctured my pack when Flor was shooting downstairs. I held it up in front of my face. Was that silver?

Flor’s hand closed around it. “I am sorry about that.”

“What about *his* pack?” Bertrand asked, cutting his eyes to James.

“Sorry, mate, but you don’t get anything from me by throwing tantrums.”

Flor sighed at the absurdity of what Bertrand was asking. “Do you think I would have let James take anything? Besides, I already checked.”

James stared at her. “You did what?”

Bertrand pulled at his chin, no doubt recalling the sensation of a pistol against the back of his head. At last, he gave a single nod. “Fine.” He straightened and tugged his jacket down. “But that does not change the fact that the texts are here. We will continue our search in the morning.”

With that, he limped off to a prayer cell he’d apparently claimed for his quarters.

“Did he say ‘we’?” James asked, glancing at the blood on the back of his hand. His bottom lip was beginning to pouch out where Bertrand had struck him. “Since when are we a team?”

I snorted. “Since he realized we’re his best chance of finding whatever he’s looking for.”

Flor hoisted her pack onto a shoulder and hefted her titanium case. “If he wants to stay, it is his funeral. I am leaving in the morning.”

“Right, well you can count me in,” James said.

I felt their gazes cut to me. But my own eyes were on the flickering light in the doorway Bertrand had disappeared through. *They are here. I can feel them.* The Frenchman had looked fit for a Parisian asylum, and yet … I felt something, too. The feeling was hard to explain—an insistent tapping at the base of my skull, an electric tingling over the hairs of my body—but what I sought was here, resonating with some essential part of me, beckoning.

“Everson?” Flor said.

I blinked from Bertrand’s flickering doorway to the cold reason in Flor’s eyes. I hesitated slightly before nodding.

“Yeah. I’ll go in the morning too.”

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I zipped my jacket to my throat as I scuffed a slow patrol around the courtyard. James, Flor, and I had split the night into three shifts—as much to keep tabs on Bertrand as the monastery—and I had the midnight to three a.m. Except for the whistle of cold wind, Dolhasca was silent. No wolves at the door, no gargoyles in the library.

As I walked, my thoughts drifted like the membranes of mist wrapping the stone pillars.

I wondered about the pull of the monastery, about my conviction that the texts were here somewhere. And that energy in the vault? The last time I had felt anything like it had been in Grandpa's study.

Grandpa had never talked about that night again. In fact, scarcely a week after he sliced—and then apparently healed—my finger, the old East Manhattan townhouse he had owned for decades went on the market. A month later, we moved into a house in a boring suburb on Long Island.

Nana explained that Grandpa wanted to slow down, to cut back on his work. "We're both getting a little too old for the bustling city," she said. "And the schools are better out here."

Grandpa did seem to be home more. And I noticed early on that he left the door to his new study unlocked, often open. But it was a plain study, without a mysterious trunk or even bookcases. Just a desk with a typewriter, surrounded by a few metal filing cabinets. I never heard chanting or chilling voices from that study. Never experienced any strange energies. Gone, too, was much of the fascination and fear I used to feel in the man's presence.

Maybe I was just growing up.

THE SUMMER before I left for college, I came home from a date around midnight. I snapped on the living room light, surprised to find Grandpa in the easy chair beside the front window, wearing one of his dark linen suits, long legs crossed. He had never waited up for me before, but I didn't get that was what he was doing. He blinked

sedately in the sudden light.

"Oh, hey," I said.

He nodded and said quietly, "Everson."

He brought his far hand from the side of the chair to his lap, and I saw he was palming a snifter of cognac. He swirled it gently, then took a sip. I had never known him to drink.

"Well, I'm gonna head up to bed," I said.

I had just reached the staircase when he spoke through his thick accent. "You are intent on returning to the city."

I twisted to face him. "Huh?" He so rarely remarked on my life, it took a moment to process his words. "Oh, yeah. Midtown College is one of the few with advanced programs in mythology studies. And I'll be on scholarship, which will offset the cost of—"

"You like the myths," he interrupted.

"Well, myths, iconography, symbols, ritual practices. Yeah."

"Why is that?"

Grandpa had always seemed distant. But it was the distance of one whose mind was other places. Maybe it was the tilt of his head now, but he looked different, as though he were more fully inside himself. I released the banister and took a step toward him.

"Because mythology speaks to something deeper," I said. "Something not quite seen. Like a huge ocean beneath a thin mantle." I watched Grandpa regarding me, a tuning fork-like resonance seeming to ring between our eyes. And was that a small smile on his lips? "Sometimes I feel that if I could, I don't know, learn the language of myth, I could access that place."

Grandpa's chuckle sounded hollow and knowing. He set the snifter on an end table, beside an old framed photo of his daughter, my mother, and beckoned with a pair of fingers. "Come here, Everson."

As I drew nearer, he held up both hands, palms showing, then moved one hand over the back of the other in an elegant gesture. When he showed me his palms again, a necklace and round pendant were in his right one.

I laughed. "How did you do that?"

He brought a slender finger to his lips. "You will wake Nana." But he was chuckling softly. "It is a simple sleight of hand."

He released the necklace, allowing it to slide into the sleeve of his suit, then repeated the trick, slowly. I peeked at his eyes, which seemed to glow with some memory. When his right hand circled the back of his left, his elbow flicked up so his sleeve deposited the necklace back into his palm. But the motion was so smooth, the timing so exact, I almost missed it.

He held the necklace out. "Here. It is for you."

I was surprised at its weight in my hand, the pendant a large coin.

“Iron,” Grandpa said.

I studied the coin’s symmetrical pattern. A circle with two squares inside, one rotated like a diamond. Intersecting lines, smaller marks on the corners. It looked like some sort of alchemy symbol. And whether or not it was my imagination, a force seemed to pulse from the cold metal.

“The necklace is an heirloom,” Grandpa said. “It is meant to protect.”

“Thank you.” I glanced at his serious face. “But protect against what?”

Grandpa took the necklace by the chain and placed it around my neck, the coin settling over my sternum. As the subtle pulse from the metal radiated through bone—I wasn’t imagining it now—the force became something deep and tidal, making me feel larger.

Grandpa looked me over and nodded, as though approving the fit of a suit.

“Wear it in the city, under your shirt.” He wasn’t asking. “And be very careful the words you speak.”

I RETURNED FROM THE MEMORY, one hand touching the place on my chest where the coin hung. My headlamp illuminated a curving wall with deep stone shelves. The atmosphere tingled with energy. I blinked twice. *The hell?* I had been walking as I reminisced, yes, and I vaguely remembered having made my way down some steps. But … I rotated slowly, my chest tightening at the idea.

I had come all the way to the vault of forbidden texts?

My heart leapt in panic. The curse of Dolhasca had led me here. I was sure of it. I was wheeling to rush back up the steps, to fresh air and space and safety, when I recognized the energy of the room. The night I had broken into Grandpa’s old study, I had felt it near the bookcases. The same bookcases whose titles had changed when Grandpa spoke that word.

Svelare.

The thought of it seemed to send a small shudder around the room, and I could have sworn something fluttered on the verge of my vision, deep in the bookshelves. Gone now, but it had looked as though something was trying to take form.

I drew in my breath, hesitated on Grandpa’s warning—

Be very careful the words you speak.

—and released the word.

“Svelare.”

The syllables vibrated from my mouth, establishing a kind of tonal

resonance in the vault. Deep in the shelves, oscillations. I blinked twice and shone my headlamp around. A second ago, the shelves had been empty. Now they were crowded with leather-bound books.

Shut the fuck up.

I reached forward and pulled one from its slot. The dark leather cover was extraordinarily well preserved. I opened it to the first hand-written page—calligraphy in old Latin. Translated, it read, *Gospel of the Egyptians*, an early Christian text believed lost.

"I don't believe this," I whispered.

Behind me, something scuffed over stone. I wheeled, a shout lodged in my throat. Expecting gargoyles, I was surprised to find a flash of lenses. But the lenses weren't aimed at me. They stared around the vault.

"They are here," Bertrand marveled, removing his glasses as he emerged from the staircase. "By God, they are here."

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Bertrand shoved past me and pulled down a book, his lighter flickering over the pages. “Oh my, a Sappho,” he said. “Composed hundreds of years before Christ.” He seemed to be speaking more to himself than to me. “And this…” He pulled and opened a second book. “Ha-haa! Yes, this is an old Persian prayer book, translated into a liturgical Latin—the only one of its kind.”

I looked from him to the books, stunned by the sudden appearance of both. Bertrand must have slipped from his room and followed me. I returned the book I had pulled and scanned the others. *The Book of Souls* would be among them, and something told me I needed to find it before Bertrand did.

“It is a treasure,” he said of the collection. “A treasure!”

I was reaching for another book when he seized my wrist. He pulled himself close until I could smell his sour sweat. In a thick whispered voice, he said, “We must not tell the others.”

“You want to keep this from them?” I asked. “Besides being impossible, we agreed to share our findings.”

“*You* agreed to share. Not me.”

I yanked my arm from his grasp. “I don’t give a damn what you did or didn’t agree to. We’d both be decomposing right now if Flor and James hadn’t saved us from the wolves and gargoyles.”

He looked from me to the books, shadows climbing over his bony face. “Fine. We tell them. But not tonight. Not until we catalogue the collection.”

Before I could answer, he shed his pack and began digging through it. When he straightened he was holding two notepads and a pair of pens. He pushed one of each into my hands. “You begin on that side. I will start over here. Then we check each other’s work. Ensure there are no omissions.”

Whether or not the man was a phony, Bertrand had proven his proficiency in old Greek and Latin as well as in ancient texts. And his proposal held merit. By working through the night, we could complete a catalogue by the morning, one the four of us could work from for the next several days. Plus, it would prevent anyone—including Bertrand—from making off with a text.

I nodded, my phobia returning to sit on my chest. “All right.”

My list grew faster than Bertrand’s, mostly because he was stopping to peruse the texts, while I was on a mission to find a single book. I hid this by working through the collection systematically. Two hours before dawn, eyes dry and strained, fingertips chaffed, I pulled down a thick tome. Even before peering on the black leather cover, its weight spoke to me. A symbol, similar to that on my coin pendant, had been burned into the leather.

On the first page, large letters confirmed my growing certainty: *Liber de Animis.* Book of Souls.

Like a child, I sat cross-legged with the book. The rest of the vault seemed to draw back, as though on tracks. Breathless, I read the first line: *“Herein lie the Grimoires sacred to the Line of Michael, Defender of Souls.”*

I raised my gaze to Bertrand, who was absorbed in his own book. Holding him there, I slid the *Book of Souls* into a sleeve in the back of my pack where the internal frame had been. I covered the opening with a sweatshirt, then stood and pulled another book from the shelf.

When Bertrand and I switched pads an hour later, he looked over my list and smiled companionably. “Oh, the knowledge that will come from these works, Everson. It will alter the trajectory of scholarship. Open new avenues of thought.” He squinted up the steps. “I am glad it was you who found them and not the others.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“You are green, but at least you are an academic.”

“Well, James too,” I pointed out. “At Oxford.”

Bertrand sniffed. “So he claims.”

“What do you mean?”

“I asked him about a professor in his department. He talked like he knew him, but I could tell by his face he did not.”

I thought about that. Flor had said his story checked out. Then again, she had also said Bertrand was a fraud—and yet here he was, displaying an interest and understanding of the texts that went far beyond a layman’s. As though picking up on my thoughts, Bertrand sniffed again.

“I do not trust the Spaniard, either. I believe she means to steal these. We must watch them closely, Everson. Even a single missing text will compromise what might be gained here. The works must be studied as a whole.”

I nodded, then lifted my pack with the hidden book and turned it so the sleeve was against the wall.

“But where did they come from?” James asked, looking from the texts to Bertrand and me. “They weren’t here yesterday. How’s this possible?”

“How are gargoyles coming to life possible?” I replied, bristling at the suspicion in James’s voice. “Hell if I know. One minute the shelves were empty, and then they were full. In any case, Bertrand and I catalogued the collection and made lists.” I handed one each to James and Flor.

“Why didn’t you wake us?” Flor asked, her eyes moving down the entries.

I searched for an answer that wouldn’t sound defensive or patronizing. But before I could speak, Bertrand spat, “Because in the confusion you would have stolen what you wanted.”

“How do we know you didn’t do the same?” Flor shot back.

“Guys, c’mon,” I said. “We checked each other’s work.” Standing so that my legs blocked my pack, I clapped my hands, anxious to change the subject. “All right, there are a lot of books but not a lot of time. So here are the ground rules. Find the ones you’re interested in. They can be checked out two at a time and taken anywhere in the monastery. But they must be returned by the next morning to give someone else a chance to read them. Are we all agreed?”

Seeing nothing objectionable in that, James and Flor nodded.

I chose two books, one because it contained a legend that went into the origins of a Saint Michael, possibly the one referenced in the *Book of Souls.* The second was the approximate size and weight of the stolen tome in my bag.

I left my traveling companions to their selections, climbing back up to the prayer cell where I had slept the first part of last night. There, I sat in a shadowy corner, facing the door. After listening to ensure no one was coming, I pulled the *Book of Souls* from my backpack and shoved the other one into its place.

Energy hummed over the book’s binding, like a life force. The same force that had pulled me back to the vault last night.

I opened the cover and began to read.

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The sound of crying pulled me from my reading. I looked up from the book, half startled to find a room around me, so completely had I fallen into the book's mind-bending world of prisms and power lines, spells and symbols, summonings and supernatural beings—Grandpa's world. Mystifying and yet oddly familiar.

Was this what Grandpa had been getting at ten years ago when he spoke of *those of our blood*?

The only clues to Grandpa's mysterious existence were the things I had observed from his closet when I was thirteen and the few odd items I found rummaging around the house after his death. A death that lacked the mystery of his life. He was struck by a car while crossing a street near our house, a no-fault case of him stepping from between two parked SUVs at the very moment a bee flew into the face of an oncoming driver. The distressed woman, on her way to pick up her son from nursery school, had the welt and stinger to prove it.

Just one of those things.

Among the items I found was Grandpa's cane, his ring with the dragon, and rolled up beside some maps in the back of his closet, an old poster advertising "Asmus the Great! Master Magician!"

The poster depicted a tuxedo-clad man with rosy cheeks reaching into a top hat. He looked like a younger version of Grandpa. Remembering the sleight-of-hand trick Grandpa had taught me, I wondered if he'd done a stint with "Barnum's American Museum," the advertised venue. There *had* been a Barnum's Museum in the city, I would later learn—the only problem was that it had burned to the ground in 1868. Had Grandpa's *grandpa* been the stage magician?

There was no one around to ask. A month after Grandpa's death, Nana succumbed to pneumonia, though I always suspected heartbreak to have played its part.

The muffled crying started up again. I hid the book in my pack, swapping it for the one I'd check out, and consulted my watch. More than ten hours had passed since I'd begun reading.

Outside my room, the gray light of dusk fell onto the courtyard. I had been dimly aware of the others coming and going throughout the day, no doubt relaying texts to and from the vault. Across the open

space, the light of a small fire danced from Bertrand's room, and I could hear his muttering voice. But the crying was coming from the room beside mine.

I craned my neck through the doorway, surprised to find Flor facedown on her bedding in the corner of the dormitory, hair splayed over the forearm she was sobbing against.

"Hey," I said softly. "Everything all right?"

She sniffled and wiped her eyes with her sleeping bag. Papers were strewn around her as though thrown in frustration.

"No," she said. "Everything is awful."

Though Bertrand's warning about her lingered in my mind, she sounded more fragile than I had ever heard her. I hadn't even thought fragility a part of her makeup. I lowered myself to the edge of her sleeping pad. "Well, if you tell me what's going on, maybe I can help."

With a long sniff, Flor sat up and tucked her hair behind her ears. She glanced up at me with damp, red-rimmed eyes—she hadn't been acting—then began gathering the strewn papers.

"This is the list I was given by the collectors," she said. "The texts I was to make sure were here. But except for a few, the names on their list do not match the names on the one you gave me."

"May I?" I asked. When she handed me the lists, I looked them over. "Ah, the names the collectors gave you are in orthodox Latin. Understandable. But the titles of the texts are in a Latin used by the monks, some of the words entirely different. So, let's see…" I pulled a pen from my shirt pocket as I consulted both lists. "This matches this here." I wrote a small letter *a* beside both titles. "And this one matches this." Beside those, I penned a *b*.

Flor watched me work, her body gradually conforming to the side of mine. Not an unpleasant feeling. I continued until I had accounted for all of the titles on the list she had brought with her. All save one.

"You see?" I smiled over at her. "Nothing to be upset about."

"What about this one?" she asked, indicating the *Book of Souls*.

"It's not here, apparently."

Her glistening gaze searched my eyes before falling to my lips. In the next moment, her mouth was pressed against mine, fingers sliding into my hair. I leaned into the kiss, dizzy with her aggression, her strong, sensual taste. She broke back suddenly, hands holding the sides of my head.

"I have wanted this since I met you."

I nodded dazedly, falling into her lips again. She pulled me on top of her, fingers unclasping the buttons of my shirt. I held her cheeks, her neck, squeezed the muscles of her upper back.

"You were right, love," a voice said.

I sat up and twisted around to find James standing inside the

doorway, a hard gleam in his eyes. As I buttoned my shirt back, I heard Flor scoot off the bedding behind me. With the shock of intrusion, I hadn't paid attention to James's actual words. "Ever heard of knocking," I muttered.

"Is that it?" Flor asked.

When James stepped into the light, I saw he was holding the *Book of Souls*.

"I imagine so," he said. "Everson had it stuffed in his pack. He can verify it, though."

I looked from James to Flor, who was standing now—and pointing her pistol at me. "Is that the missing book?" she asked. Her hair was mussed from our two minutes of heaven, but her voice was ice cold.

I stammered silently for a second, my lips still throbbing. "What in the hell is going on?"

"I'm sorry, Everson," she said. "We were hired to do a job."

"We?" My eyes flicked between them, head spinning with the unreality of what was happening. "You're working together?"

James gave a hard smile as he paced around me to Flor. Pulling her to his side, he kissed her crown with the familiarity of a lover. "As I said, two heads are better than one."

"Is it the missing book?" Flor repeated.

"Get him to tell you," I said bitterly. "James speaks old Lat…" I stopped, remembering how he had found the inscription outside the vault of forbidden texts but not actually translated it. "You don't, do you? You just know that one line you fed me at the pension."

The manuscripts are said to be in archaic Latin.

"Past tense," James corrected me. "I've already forgotten it."

I sighed. Who knew how long they'd been hanging out in the village, waiting for an unwitting researcher to show up and act as their translator, to ensure they would locate the correct texts. They had no doubt tried Bertrand, who rightly saw them as trouble—hence their need to impugn his character. Everson Croft on the other hand? Classic dupe. I fell for the whole damned thing, from Flor's pretended reluctance to travel together, to her supposed Google search, to her hot damsel in distress act. My gaze moved across the papers I had notated for her.

"I believe Flor asked you a question," James said. "Is this the missing book?"

I looked from the bore of Flor's pistol to the tome in James's hand. I remembered what I had felt while reading it, the shifting deep inside me, like wooden boxes being pushed from a trapdoor, one that opened onto the same subterranean ocean I had described to Grandpa. The book didn't belong to them, and I sensed the powerful book felt the same way.

"What will you do with it?" I asked.

James chuckled. "I'll take that as a *yes*." He flipped open the book and thumbed through the pages irreverently. "We'll be taking it, of course. Taking them all. We have very wealthy collectors in the wings. Flor wasn't lying about that. Just about them wanting to purchase the collection from the Romanian government."

"Would you consider leaving that one?"

"Heavens, no." James clapped the book closed and tucked it under an arm. "It's the one the collectors are most interested in."

Heat burned in my cheeks. "So what now?"

"We have to send you and Bertrand out, I'm afraid," James said.

"Feed us to the wolves," I said numbly.

"Messy for you, but rather tidy for us."

Flor huffed. "You two are talking too much. The alternative is I shoot you."

"How sweet," I muttered.

James set the *Book of Souls* down and lifted Flor's rifle. It was no accident she was carrying silver ammo, or that James had packed rock-salt necklaces. This was their work—looting ancient sites, some of them cursed, no doubt. "Let's go," James said. "We'll pick up Bertrand on the way."

"Can I grab my backpack, at least?"

"No." Flor jabbed me in the side with the pistol, sending a spear through one of the spots she'd soothed last night. "Move your ass."

I considered running as I stumbled into the courtyard, but there was nowhere *to* run. Doing so would just get me shot. Bertrand's and my best chance would be to do as they said. Once outside, we could scale a tree and wait until morning, attempt the journey down to the village then. It seemed a reasonable plan until I remembered the bear-like paws on the wolves. Something told me they would use them to climb after us.

We arrived at Bertrand's room and found him sitting in a corner, scribbling in a notepad on his propped-up knees. His hair jerked as he consulted open texts on either side of him.

"Check out time," James called.

Bertrand's face shot up, his eyes seeming to refocus from some distant realm. He swept his hair to one side and squinted at the pointed weapons, which glinted in the light of his small fire. "What is the meaning of this?"

"You were right," I told him. "They're a couple of scoundrels. They're going to send us out to the wolves and take the books to some collector so they can buy themselves iPods and fancy shoes."

"Oh, don't be such a poor sport," James said. "If you'd shown yourself a little more agreeable to our line of work, why, we might

have asked you to join us. We're in need of a new translator."

I remembered my reaction at dinner in the village when Flor suggested we split the spoils. Another test.

"Why?" I growled. "What happened to your last one?"

"We had a disagreement," Flor said. "Now get moving. Both of you."

I had expected Bertrand to put up a fight, but he was on his hands and knees gathering his notepads.

"Leave them," Flor ordered. "They will do you no good out there."

"Oh, let him have them, love," James whispered. "It'll occupy his hands and we can get them out of here with less fuss."

Bertrand hobbled up beside me, notepads pressed to his chest, eyes shifting wildly. The discovery of the texts had meant everything to him. "They will not get away with this," he spat. "I will be *damned* if they get away with this."

"Keep cool," I whispered. "We'll figure out something once we're outside."

He ignored me, rifling through his notepads as James and Flor prodded us into the courtyard. The barricaded entrance wasn't entirely barricaded anymore, I saw. Stones had been moved and one of the timber beams set aside for Bertrand and me to squeeze through. The cold wind funneling into the monastery carried the cries of wolves. Not close, but not too distant, either.

Beside me, Bertrand's grumbling turned to hard mutters.

"Stay cool," I repeated distractedly, trying to remember the terrain outside the monastery. If we could find a cave in the rock face, a place to fortify ourselves, we had a slim chance of surviving the night.

Bertrand's muttering rose in pitch.

"Shut up," Flor said—which were my thoughts, as well. He was going to get us both ventilated. But when I turned, I found that he was no longer muttering for muttering's sake. He was reading from one of his notepads. And I recognized the words. The chant was an incantation meant to summon something dark and powerful, an idea that might have seemed insane to me only a few days ago.

"Be careful," I whispered, remembering a warning inside the *Book of Souls*. "Whatever you call up you're going to have to put back down."

But the atmosphere of the monastery was already changing. Something was sucking out the oxygen, making it hard to breathe. And an unpleasant smell was rising. A sickly sweet odor that stuck like barbs in my throat. The odor of whatever Bertrand was summoning, I realized.

"The Frenchman first," Flor said as we arrived at the entranceway. "I cannot stand the sight of him any longer."

Bertrand snapped straight, the notepads spilling from his arms. He remained like that, eyes large and staring, until I thought he was having a seizure. I grabbed his rigid left arm and gave it a shake.

“Bertrand?”

When he turned, I released him and staggered back a step. Blackness had spread over his eyes like spilled ink. And his lips were stretching from his teeth, forming a smile so large it looked agonizing.

“You can no longer stand the sight of Bertrand?” he said to Flor in an alien voice, as though something was humming deep in his throat. “Well perhaps he can no longer stand the sight of *you*.”

His smile unhinged and a droning black cloud shot from his mouth. Wasps, I realized in horror. Flor had time to scream before the wasps swarmed her face and smothered her cries.

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"S-stop that." James's huge eyes looked from Flor's collapsed body to Bertrand—or whatever Bertrand had become. Seeming to remember he was holding a rifle, James raised it. "Stop! Get them off her!"

Bertrand laughed. "As you wish."

He waved a hand and the hundreds upon hundreds of wasps lifted from Flor and swarmed James. He screamed and stumbled backwards, rifle shots cracking as though the swarm was a being whose heart he might pierce. I crouched beside Flor and moved the limp arm from across her face. She looked nothing like the woman of only moments ago. Her face had become a disfiguration of red welts, eyes a pair of glistening lines, lips a fruit that had burst in the sun.

Oh God. I lowered her lifeless arm.

Above me, Bertrand laughed, the sound a sick buzzing. "You dare insult a Wasp Demon, mother of the brood, matron of death." I pressed a forearm to my nose, the cloying smell threatening to choke me.

"Help me, Everson!" James shrieked above the thickening swarm. "For God's sake, *help me!*"

He tripped over a section of pillar. As he fell onto his back, the wasps descended over his blondness like a black blanket, muffling his cries. A moment later, his spastic arms collapsed out to his sides, the spent rifle clacking against stone.

With Bertrand's back to me, I left Flor's body and edged toward the monastery entrance. The wasps rose from James and returned to Bertrand, funneling into his mouth. There had clearly been another spell book in the collection, a dark one that Bertrand had gotten his hands on. I didn't know how possessions worked exactly, didn't know how much of Bertrand remained in his body. But I wasn't planning on sticking around to find out.

I was almost to the opening when eyes flashed from the darkness beyond, and a thick, snapping snout lunged into the space.

"Damn!" I cried, stumbling backwards.

Front legs squeezed through as the wolf wriggled and pushed his head in. More fanged snouts jabbed into the surrounding gaps. I shot a

glance back at Bertrand. He was finger-combing his hair with both hands, as though cleaning a pair of antennas. My gaze flew around the courtyard. All the monastery's rooms were doorless. No places to shut out the wolves—or Bertrand. And my pepper spray would only keep them at bay for so long.

The Book of Souls, I thought.

I launched into a run toward the room where James had left it.

Behind me, the wolf burst inside with a jagged cry, his thick nails scratching over the stone, gaining speed. But a fresh buzzing was climbing over the sounds of the wolves.

"Fly, my beauties," Bertrand said. "Kill them."

Yes, please do.

"The human, too."

Crap.

I seized the side of the dormitory doorway with one hand and swung myself into Flor's old room. The wolf overshot the door, skittering as he tried to brake. I kicked past Flor's bag and titanium case, scooped up the *Book of Souls,* and pressed my back to the wall. I opened the book and flipped to the rear. Most of the book's spells required something called a casting prism and Words of Power.

But not summonings.

A wasp landed on my neck, sending a molten barb down to my spine. I crushed it with my shoulder and turned more pages. Out in the courtyard, sharp cries and yelps went up in the thickening swarm. But the swarm hadn't reached me—or the wolf who had been on my heels. A low growl sounded from the doorway. I glanced up to find the beast stalking toward me, ears twitching in the haze of wasps, impervious to their stings. Something told me this was the Alpha. Raising a leg in preparation to kick, I dropped my gaze to the page before me.

"*Thelonious,*" I boomed, pushing energy into the word, making each syllable count. I didn't know who or what I was invoking, but when the alternative was certain death, there was no time to be choosy. "*I beseech you for aid,"* I said in the old Latin. *"I offer myself as a vessel in exchange."*

Creamy white light fluttered on the verge of my vision, then roared in, like a strong surf. I could no longer see the wolf, the wasps, the room, the book in my own hands. Just the frothy light that rolled up in layers, growing thicker. From beneath the roaring light came a slow, throbbing sound, like a bass line. The sound was compelling, arousing. I could have been inside a West Village jazz club, men and women grooving and bumping bodies.

"Yesss?" came a rich voice.

I squinted at where the creamy light seemed to thicken around a

large, inchoate form. A Buddha. It was clear, though, that this Buddha was no esthetic. Sensual forms moved around his corpulent body, attending to his needs, which seemed to include food, drink … other things.

"Are you Thelonious?" I asked.

"Indeed," he replied with a pleasant bass laugh. He seemed benign, at least.

"I need your help."

Though my heart beat slammed through my words, I sensed Thelonious had drawn me into some sort of parallel plane, outside space and time.

"I'd say so." Feminine titters accompanied the spirit's rumbling laughter. "But I'm busy at the moment."

"Look, I'm only twenty-three," I babbled. "My life's not perfect, but I'm not ready for it to end. I live in New York—the greatest city on Earth. I love my chosen field. I'm the youngest PhD candidate in my department and just a thesis away from graduating. I'm a, ah, a lifelong Mets fan—and they're actually doing well this year." I was really grasping now, but if he rejected my appeal and cast me back, I was a dead man. Simple as that.

Thelonious chuckled. "Long time since I've been in New York. Are there still dance halls?"

"Oh man, a ton."

"And the women?"

"Millions, and they're all beautiful."

He made a noise of interest, then heaved himself up, sending his harem streaming away. "And you say you're a young man?" He circled me as though in assessment. "Learned … enjoys sport." He stopped in front of me. "If I help you this once, you'll give yourself as a vessel for all time?"

I hesitated. "And what does that entail, exactly?"

He rumbled more laughter as something like a hand descended onto my shoulder. "Nothing but good times."

"So we'll be running my body like, what, a time share?"

"When the itch for city life needs scratching, Thelonious will come calling."

"Otherwise, my body's my own?"

"One hundred percent."

"And you won't be doing anything illegal in here, right?"

He released more rich laughter. "Not unless you consider loving and living crimes."

As the bass line and creamy lights of his world throbbed through me, I found myself nodding. Maybe an occasional visit by Thelonious would do me good, get me out of my studio apartment now and again.

Given my sad social life, it certainly couldn't make things worse.

"All right," I said, not wanting to think about it too hard. "I agree to your terms. In exchange for helping me with the wolves and wasp demon, I pledge myself as your vessel, whenever the, um … itch needs scratching." I probably should have asked for an estimate on how often that would be.

"Right on, brother. Right on."

Thelonious gave me the equivalent of a soul shake, and I was back in the monastery, the *Book of Souls* open in my hands, one leg raised, and a huge wolf stalking me through a growing fog of wasps.

"Kill them all!" Bertrand cried from the courtyard, his voice a phlegmy buzz now, as though he were choking on the wasps he spawned. The ensuing laughter sounded like someone coughing up a lung.

I glanced around for my own summoned being, wincing as another wasp stung my brow.

"Thelonious?"

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The *Book of Souls* tumbled from my trembling hands. Three more stings seared my upper back, spreading like a deep burn. I flailed to slap the wasps away, the motion exciting the wolf. He snarled and charged.

I cringed against the wall and kicked out. My heel caught the wolf's jaw, harder than I'd struck anything in my life. Bone crunched, and the two-hundred-pound wolf staggered backwards. He righted himself drunkenly, a rope of pink saliva hanging from his crooked mouth.

"That's right!" I cried, my fear swelling into anger. "There's more where that came from."

Nice one, a bass voice rumbled.

"Thelonious!"

Either my body was growing or my share of it becoming smaller as the chuckling spirit eased all the way in. The warm, creamy light from earlier undulated through me—an ecstatic force of strength and virulence. As its aura pulsed from me, the attacking wasps wavered and fell to the stone floor.

We stepped toward the wolf, wasp husks crunching underfoot. The Alpha backed away like a scolded house dog, whimpering and trailing urine. When his haunches hit a wall, he pressed himself flat. I—or rather, Thelonious—laughed and reached down to scratch his ear, the hair surprisingly smooth. The Alpha licked our hand before succumbing to his stings.

"Incubus!" Out in the courtyard, Bertrand stood in a black storm of wasps, arms open, clothes crawling. "Leave the human to his fate."

"What are you prepared to deal for him?" Thelonious asked through my mouth.

Hey! I said. *You and I are already locked into a deal!*

Ignoring me, Thelonious walked us through the storm, his creamy light illuminating the courtyard in swimmy waves. Wasps peppered us from all sides only to drop in a steady hail. It was like being inside an armored tank, but one I had no control over and that might eject me at any moment.

"I will spare you the agony of feeling him die, incubus," Bertrand

answered. “Now leave him to me!”

Thelonious shook his head. “Bad deal.”

He thrust my arms forward, and I watched my hands close around Bertrand’s throat. Wasps writhed beneath his skin where I squeezed. His enormous black eyes startled, but more in insult it seemed than pain. He opened his mouth, unleashing another torrent of insects. As I tried to wince back, Thelonious only seemed to grow larger and more powerful.

“Go back to your own joint.” He forced the possessed Frenchman to his knees. Bertrand buzz-shrieked, his arms breaking into more wasps as he beat at our hands. “You’re killing the mood here,” Thelonious said.

In a final explosion of dying wasps, the rest of Bertrand came apart. But something grotesque remained—a huge queen wasp, curled at his core. Her sticky wings opened out and vibrated, the sudden wind pushing us back. With an angry scream, the queen rose, as though to escape the monastery through the open-air courtyard. But Thelonious jumped and seized her by a rear leg.

Watch the stinger!

I had hardly formed the thought when the stinger skewered my right forearm. I clenched my teeth, but the excruciating pain never came. “The sharper the thorn,” Thelonious said, pulling out the stinger and snapping it from the queen’s body. “The sweeter the fruit.”

Um … what?

Thelonious tossed the stinger away and dragged the queen to the courtyard floor, flipping her so her wings were pinned beneath her. The queen kicked her legs and rotated her alien head.

Wait, you’re not planning on…

With a rumbling purr, Thelonious brought his mouth—*our* mouth—down to the queens pincher jaws.

Oh God, you are.

I tried to recoil, to twist my head away, but an instant before our lips closed around the gnashing mandibles, Thelonious stopped and began to draw from her. The queen strained back, but her essence was leaving her, being pulled into Thelonious. Hers was a spiny, spiteful essence, full of poison, but at its center was a single, sweet drop. The feminine nectar Thelonious was after.

When the queen fell still, Thelonious rolled us off her, contented. “That was all right,” he rumbled.

Yeah, for you, maybe. I peeked over at the dead queen. *Is this going to be par for the course?*

“Know something, young blood?” he said in a languid voice. “Believe I’m gonna enjoy this partnership.”

Thelonious’s creamy white energy that had seemed so benign and

good-time a moment before collapsed into something dense and black. I choked as it burrowed deeper into me, like a parasite, affixing itself to my soul with hundreds of piercing hooks. The shock of the binding pitched my mind into an oblivion as pitiless as the being I had just bargained with.

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I cracked my eyes open onto a diffusion of pale light. I was peering at the sky above the courtyard, the sun a white smear beyond a wash of gray clouds. I pushed myself up, wincing from my wasp stings, and squinted around. The wasps and demon were gone—as though evaporated into mist—but not their victims. The bodies of a dozen or more large wolves lay stiff and bloated. Near the entrance, I spotted James and Flor, where they had fallen.

I staggered to my feet, recalling all that had happened last night. The deception, Bertrand's summoning, Thelonious. I could feel the incubus spirit now, a dark twining, a stain on my soul.

"You are a fool."

I wheeled to find a tall man stepping from Flor's room. Though he was without his peasant hat and no longer spoke in broken English, I recognized him by his battered rubber boots. The cart driver paced into the courtyard, The *Book of Souls* open in his hands.

"I told you the journey would be your death," he said.

I didn't like his threatening tone. "Who are you?" I asked, stooping for a rock.

He raised his disfigured face from the book. When I drew back the rock in warning, he flicked his fingers and uttered something. An invisible force hit my hand, knocking the rock away.

"You are the grandson of Asmus Croft." He appraised me with sober eyes, his left one cloudy from the wolf attack.

I rubbed my hand. "You knew him?"

"Of course." The dragon ring on his third finger gleamed dully as he closed the book. "He was a member of the Order, a principal in the war against the Inquisition, a grand mage."

"A wizard?"

The man's statement seemed to affirm something I had known on a cellular level, and it explained so much. There was no time to marvel, though. I sensed danger around the man. He had made the perilous journey through the forest, after all, and just disarmed me with a word and gesture.

"Who *are* you?" I glanced around. "What are you doing here?"

"I am called Lazlo. I am a Keeper of the Books."

“Keeper of…?” I quickly fit the pieces together. “So you’re the one who hid the books in the vault? Wh-who set up the spell to animate the gargoyles?” I recalled the battered looters downstairs and stepped back.

“Books must be kept from certain hands.” He tapped his scarred temple as he strode forward. “Certain minds.”

“Look, I’ll leave here and never come back, never talk about the texts again. I-I’ll forget everything I saw. I promise.”

When Lazlo arrived in front of me, I sensed a being who was much older than he appeared. And had he said something about a war against the Inquisition? Could that have been the “awful war” Nana mentioned? But the Inquisition was centuries ago. My mind seized on the poster in Grandpa’s closet, the one advertising “Asmus the Great!” at Barnum’s American Museum. The depicted stage magician hadn’t been his grandfather. It had been Grandpa himself.

“You have read the Words,” Lazlo said. “You have spoken them. And yet here you stand while your friends are fallen.” His gaze shifted from James to Flor, then to the pile of clothes that had belonged to Bertrand. “It means you are a magic born, like your grandfather.”

“What?”

“But you are still a fool. You made an accord with an ancient being, one that would have consumed a lesser soul. Such an accord might be tempered with practice, but it can never be unbound. You are marked for all time, Everson Croft.” The judgment in his tone made me shudder. “I have contacted those more knowledgeable in such matters. I am waiting to hear from them.”

“Hear what?”

“Whether to train you into our Order or to destroy you.”

I ONCE WONDERED what it was like for a man awaiting execution to hear whether a last-minute stay had been granted. Now I knew. It was a hard stone in the pit of my stomach. A prickling nausea. A constant disbelieving. While Lazlo took care of the bodies, I spent the day confined to my prayer cell—organizing my pack, reflecting on my life, and, yes, praying.

Praying and wondering.

Grandpa must have suspected I was a magic born, as Lazlo put it. But why hadn’t he said anything? Or had he? I remembered him placing the necklace with the heavy coin around my neck. *Wear it in the city, under your shirt. And be very careful the words you speak.*

A warning. But against what?

He had given me something else of his, the day before his death,

though I hadn't recognized it at the time.

The day was Sunday. I had ridden the train in from the city for the weekend. Nana and I attended morning Mass at the neighborhood cathedral, one that never seemed to resonate for me in the same way St. Martin's in Manhattan had. Afterwards, when Nana had gone upstairs for her nap, Grandpa called me into his study.

"Everson," he said, turning toward me from his desk. His cane rested across his long knees, the same cane he had carried since as far back as I could remember, whose hidden blade had once bitten my finger. "It seems I am having trouble opening it. Would you try?"

A bracing fear seized me, similar to the one I had felt upon being discovered in his closet. I hadn't seen the blade since that night, almost eight years before, and I wasn't sure I wanted to see it again.

"Yeah … sure."

"Hold it at the top and middle, like this."

I did as Grandpa said, the wood smooth and cool in my uncertain grip.

"Now do not think about it," he said. "Just pull."

The cane seemed to catch at first. No, clench. It was clenching. But after another moment, the wood warming in my hands, it released, sliding apart in a single smooth stroke. I looked at the handsome sword I held in my right hand and then at the staff in my left. I was surprised at how comforting their weight felt, like they were extensions of my arms.

But more than that, they felt … empowering.

"Very good," Grandpa said, taking them back from me. He slid the sword home again, the two parts he had wanted me to separate slotting along an invisible seam. "It remembers you."

Remembers?

A flash of him thumbing away my blood and running it along the sword blade came back to me. But before I could ask what he meant, Grandpa turned to his desk. "If you'll excuse me, Everson, I have some things to tie up now."

Our final conversation. So little said—and yet maybe that had been the point.

I was pulled from the memory by a shadow in the doorway. I turned to find Lazlo's tall form approaching, the pale scars across his face glowing in the late light. I stood at rigid attention.

"I have heard," he said, his voice grave.

I almost couldn't form the single syllable, my mouth was so dry. "And?"

He stepped all the way into the room. Cold power seemed to warp the air around his hands. My heart beat like a dusty drum, but I refused to cower. Whatever the answer, I sensed he had been right.

The journey to Dolhasca had been my death. The old Everson Croft was no more.

"As decreed by the Order," Lazlo said, "I am to initiate you into training tonight."

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Demon Moon

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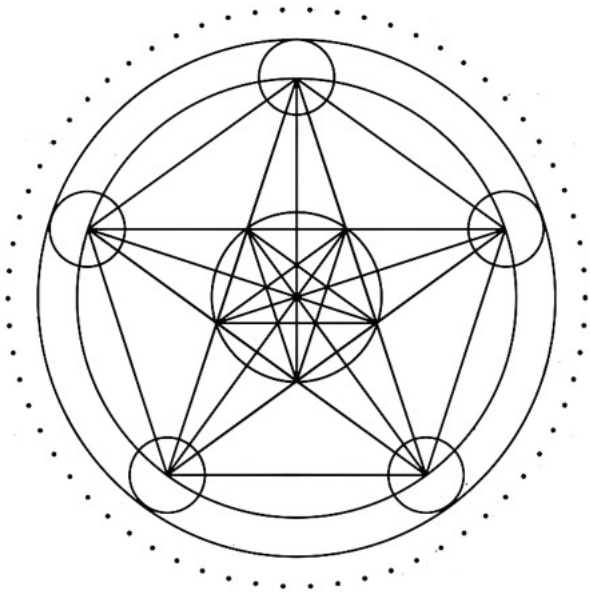
Book 1



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1

I blew out a curse as the first cold droplets of rain pelted my face and punched through my magic. As if I wasn't already running late.

Making an umbrella of my coat collar, I stooped into a run, skirting bags of garbage that swelled from the fronts of row houses like pustules, but it was no use. The downpour that blackened the sidewalk and drove rats from the festering piles also broke apart my hunting spell.

And it had been one of my better ones.

I took refuge on a crumbling porch and shook out my coat. I was in the pit of the East Village, and it stunk. Except for a flicker of street light, the block was midnight dark, the building across the way a brick shell, hollowed out by arson. Not the domicile of the conjurer I needed to stop. Or more likely save.

Assuming I could find him now.

"Seguire," I said in a low, thrumming voice.

Most hunting spells worked like a dowsing rod, pulling the user toward the source of something. In this case, taboo magic. But reliable hunting spells, such as those needed to navigate New York's convoluted streets, required time to prepare. And even then they were delicate.

"Seguire," I repeated, louder.

Though the storm was already sweeping off, the spell refused to take shape again. I swore under my breath. Magic and moving water made poor bedfellows. And here I'd dropped a fat hundred on the booster: ground narwhale tusk. Sunk cost, I thought bitterly as I hustled back to the sidewalk. There were a lot of those in wizardry, my svelte wallet the proof.

Splashing in the direction I'd been pulled before the cloudburst, I gave up on the hunting spell and resorted to twenty-twenty vision, scanning passing buildings for signs of life.

As the sidewalks thickened with larger mounds of garbage, the rats became more territorial. I knocked aside several with my walking cane. The soul eaters that hunkered like shadows in the below-ground stairwells weren't quite so bold. They watched with hollow eyes before shrinking from the protective power of my necklace, in search

of weaker, drug-addled prey. Luckily for them, post-Crash New York was a boomtown for chemical addiction.

Unfortunately for me, the financial crash had also made a growth stock of amateur conjurers.

They tended to be men and women seeking lost money or means—or simply some meaning where their prior faith, whether spiritual or material, seemed to have failed them. Understandable, certainly, but as far as my work went, a royal pain in the ass. Most mortals could only access the nether realms, and shallowly at that. In their fat-fingered efforts, they called up grubby creatures better left undisturbed. Ones more inclined to make a sopping meal of a conjurer's heart than grant his material wishes.

Trust me, it wasn't pretty.

Neither was the job of casting the charming beings back to their realms, but it was the job I'd been decreed. I had some nice acid burns and a missing right ear lobe to prove it. A business card might have read:

Everson Croft
Wizard Garbage Collector

Nice, huh? But unlike the city's striking sanitation workers, I couldn't just walk off the job.

Small messes became big messes, and in magical terms, that was a recipe for ruin. The apocalyptic kind. Better to scoop up the filth, drop it down the hatch, and batten down the lid. Plenty of ancient evils lurked in the Deep Down, their senses attuned to the smallest openings to our world. Human history was dotted with near misses, thanks in part to the vigilance of my lineage.

The thought of being the one to screw up that streak was hell on a good night's sleep, let me tell you.

At Avenue C, I rounded a small mountain of plowed trash and shuffled to a stop. A new scent was skewering the vaporous reek, hooking like a talon in my throat. A sickly-sweet scent, like crushed cockroach or…

Fear spread through me as I raised my eyes toward the source: a steep apartment building with a pair of lights burning near the top floor. Dark magic dissipated above the building in a blood-red haze.

I *was* too late. And whatever the conjurer had summoned was no cockroach.

"Crap," I spat, and launched into a run.

The smell was distinctly demonic.

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2

I stumbled into a blacked-out lobby, raised my ironwood cane, and uttered, *"Illuminare."*

White light swelled from an opal inset in the cane's end to reveal an upended concierge's desk and graffiti-smeared walls. The single elevator door opposite me was open. I moved toward it, noting the message sprayed over the burned-out elevator lights: "STEP RIGHT IN," with an arrow inviting riders into a carless shaft. I peeked down the two-story plunge to a subbasement, where I could hear something large thump-dragging around.

No thanks.

I hit the stairwell and took the steps two at a time. The cloying smell from the street sharpened in my sinuses, making my eyes water. I had smelled demon before, but in Eastern Europe, years ago—the near-death experience had marked my passage into wizardhood, in a way.

But no, never here. Not in New York.

Which meant a seriously evil conjurer had slipped under the Order's watchful gaze. I considered sending up a message, but that would take energy I couldn't afford at the moment—not to mention time. The Oracular Order of Magi and Magical Beings was an esteemed and ancient body. Accordingly, they made decisions at a pace on par with the Mendenhall glacier.

That, and I was still on their iffy list for what had happened ten years earlier, during the aforementioned demonic encounter. Never mind that my actions (which, okay, *had* involved summoning an incubus spirit) saved my life, or that I was only twenty-two at the time.

So yeah, the less contact with the Order, the better, I'd since learned.

Between the third and fourth floors, the stairwell began to vibrate. At the fifth floor—the one on which I'd observed the lights from outside—the vibrating became a hammering. I pulled the stairwell door open onto a stink of hard diesel and understood the commotion's source: a gas-powered generator. At the hallway's end, light outlined a door.

I was halfway to the door when a woman's scream pierced the tumult. Jerking my cane into two parts, I gripped a staff in my left hand and a steel sword in my right. A shadow grew around the door a second before it banged open.

The man was six foot ten, easy. Blades of black tattooing scaled his pin-pierced face, giving over to an all-out ink fight on his shaved scalp. Leather and spiked studs stretched over powerful arms holding what looked like a pump-action shotgun.

The sorcerer's bodyguard?

He inclined forward, squinting into the dim hallway. The screaming behind him continued, accompanied now by angry beats and the wail of a guitar. I exhaled and sheathed my sword.

Punks. The literal kind.

"Hey!" Tattoo Face boomed as I retreated back toward the stairwell. "You're missing a kickass set. Blade's only on till two." Then as a further inducement: "Half cover, since you got here late."

I sniffed the air, but the generator's fumes were still clouding over the demon smell. I couldn't fix on a direction. I returned to Tattoo Face, shouting to be heard. "Do you live here?"

He shrugged as he lowered the shotgun. "Live. Squat."

"Seen anyone strange in the building?" I peered past him into the hazy room of head-bangers, the pink-haired singer/screamer—Blade, I presumed—standing on the hearth of a bricked-over fireplace. I decided to rephrase the question. "Anyone who looks like they don't belong?"

Behind all of his ink, the punk's face was surprisingly soft, almost boyish, but it hardened as I stepped more fully into the generator-powered light. I followed his gaze down to where my tweed jacket and dark knit tie peeked from the parting flaps of my trench coat. Beneath his own jacket, he was wearing a bandolier of shotgun shells.

"You a narc or something?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Just looking for someone."

His eyes fell further to my walking cane, which, not to polish my own brass, was at definite odds with someone six feet tall and in his apparent prime. My hairline had receded slightly, but still… Tattoo Face frowned studiously, as though still undecided if he could trust me.

"I help people," I added.

After another moment, he nodded. "Strange guy showed up a couple of weeks ago. Hauled a big trunk upstairs." He raised his eyes. "Unit right above ours. Talks to himself. Same things, over and over."

I sprinted back to the stairwell, not bothering with the usual pretense of a trick knee to explain the cane. Tattoo Face seemed not to notice.

“Blade’s on till two!” he shouted after me.

I raised a hand in thanks for the reminder, but I was still mulling the *talks to himself* part. The *over and over* sounded like chanting.

Add them up and I’d found my conjurer.

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3

On the sixth floor, the demon stink was back. And gut-rottingly potent. I called more light to my cane and advanced on the door at hallway's end, weathered floorboards creaking underfoot.

The knob turned in my grasp, but one or more bolts were engaged. Crouching, I sniffed near the dark door space and immediately regretted the decision. "Holy *hell*," I whispered against my coat sleeve. The sickly-sweet scent burned all the way up to my brain, like ammonia.

Drawing the sword from my cane, I pointed it at the door and uttered, *"Vigore."*

A force shot down the length of the blade and snapped the bolts. The door blew inward. With another incantation, the light from my staff slid into a curved shield. I crouched, ready for anything, but except for the vibrating coming from one floor down, the space beyond the door was still and silent.

I tested the threshold with the tip of my sword. It broke the plane cleanly, which meant no warding spells.

Odd…

I entered, sword and glowing staff held forward. The unit was a restored tenement that, like many in the East Village, had been written off in the Crash's rumbling wake and left to die. Shadows climbed and fell over a newspaper-littered living room. I crept past sticks of curb-side furniture and a spill of canned goods before ducking beneath a line of hanging boxer briefs, still damp.

Hardly the evil-sorcerer sanctum I'd imagined.

I stuck my light into one of the doorless bedrooms, the silence tense against my eardrums. A thin roll-up mattress lay slipshod on a metal bed frame, dirty sheets puddled around its legs. A cracked window framed the bombed-out ruin of a neighboring building. When a pipe coughed, I wheeled, my gaze falling to a crowded plank-and-cinderblock bookcase.

In the light of my staff, I scanned book spines that might as well have read "Amateur Conjurer." Abrahamic texts, including a Bible, gave way to dime-store spell books and darker tomes, but without organization. Spaghetti shots in the dark. Someone looking for power

or answers.

So where had the demon come from? More crucially, where had it gone?

In the neighboring bedroom, I flinched as my gaze met my own hazel eyes in a mirror on the near wall. *Gonna give myself a fricking heart attack*. Opposite the mirror, an oblong table held a scatter of spell-cooking implements. A Bunsen burner stood on one end, its line snaking to a tipped-over propane tank. Beside the tank, a pair of legs protruded.

I rounded the table and knelt beside the fallen conjurer. Parting a spill of dark, greasy hair, I took in a middle-aged male face with Coke-bottle glasses that had fallen askew, magnifying his whiskered right cheek. I recognized some of the conjurers in the city—or thought I did—and I'd never seen this guy. I straightened his glasses and patted his cheek firmly.

"*Hey*," I whispered.

The man choked on a snort, then fell back into his mind-shattered slumber. He was alive, anyway.

I raised my light to the protective circle the man had chalked on the floorboards and no doubt stood inside while casting his summoning spell. A common mistake. Chalk made fragile circles. And a circle only protected spell casters capable of instilling them with power. That excluded most mortals, who weren't designed to channel, much less direct, the ley energies of this world.

They can damn sure act as gateways to other worlds, though.

My gaze shifted to a second circle near the table's far end, this one with a crude pentagram drawn inside. From a toppled pile of ash and animal entrails, a glistening residue slid into an adjacent bathroom.

Crap.

I felt quickly beneath the man's army surplus jacket and exhaled as my hand came back dry. The only reason he wasn't dead or mortally wounded was the recentness of the spell. Demonic creatures summoned from deeper down underwent a period of gestation, usually in a dark, damp space, to fortify their strength. They emerged half blind, drawn by the scent of the conjurer's vital organs, from which they derived even more potency.

That I'd arrived before that had happened was to my advantage. I hoped.

Rising, I crept toward the bathroom.

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4

The trail turned dark red over the bathroom's dingy tiles, gobbets of black matter glistening in its wake. By now I was more or less desensitized to the smell, thank God. Through the half-open door, my light shone over a dripping faucet. The end of a free-standing tub glowed beyond.

With a foot, I edged the door wider.

The trail climbed the side of the tub, spread into a foul puddle, then climbed again. This time into a torn-out section of tiling between the shower head and the hot and cold spigots down below.

I adjusted my slick grip on the sword handle. The creature was inside the wall.

My sword hummed as I channeled currents of ley energy. With a *"Vigore!"* I thrust the sword toward the hole.

Tile and plaster exploded over my light shield in a dusty wave. A keening cry went up. In the exposed wall, wedged behind oozing pipes, I saw it. The creature had enfolded its body with a pair of membranous black wings. From a skull-sharp head of bristling hair, a pair of albino-white eyes stared blindly. Before I could push the attack, the creature screamed again.

The jagged sound became a weapon. Waves as sharp as the creature's barbed teeth pierced my thoughts and fractured my casting prism. I was dealing with a shrieker. A lower demonic being but ridiculously deadly—even to wizards.

My light shield wavered in front of me, then burst in a shower of sparks. The energetic release thrust me backwards as the room fell dark, my right heel catching the threshold. A squelch sounded, followed by the shallow splash of the thing dropping into the tub.

I flailed for balance but went down. My right elbow slammed into the floor, sending a numbing bolt up and down my arm. When metal clanged off behind me, I realized I'd lost my sword.

Beyond my outstretched legs, claws scrabbled over porcelain.

I kick-scooted away, sweeping an arm back for my weapon.

Wings slapped the air, the wet sound swallowed by the shrieker's next cry. Abandoning my search, I thrust my staff into the darkness above my face. The end struck something soft. A claw hooked behind

my right orbital bone before tearing away, missing my eyeball by a breath.

I felt the shrieker flap past me, still clumsy in its just-summoned state. No doubt going for the conjurer. But if I was going to stop it, I had to do something about the damned screaming.

Blood dribbled down the side of my face as I sat up. Praying the shrieker wasn't rounding back on me, I jammed a finger into each ear. With the screaming muted, I repeated a centering mantra. Within seconds, the mental prism through which I converted ley energy into force and light reconstituted. A white orb swelled from the end of my staff, illuminating the apartment once more. I quickly touched the staff to each ear, uttering Words of Power. Shields of light energy covered them like muffs, blocking out the shrieker's cries.

I scooped up my sword and raised both sword and staff, expecting to find the shrieker hunched over the splayed-out conjurer. But the conjurer was alone, the shrieker nowhere in sight. The animal entrails were missing from the summoning circle, though, meaning it had fed.

Not good.

I raised my light toward the windows to ensure they were still intact. Remembering the blown-open front door, I hurried to the main room, terrified the creature had gotten out and into the city's six-million-person buffet. I ducked beneath the clothesline and felt the newspapers at my feet gusting up. I spun to find the abomination flapping at my face.

"Vigore!" I cried.

The wave-like force from my sword blasted the shrieker into a corner of the ceiling. It dropped onto a radiator, then tumbled wetly to the floor. I repeated the Word, but the shrieker scrabbled behind a wooden chair and darted into the bedroom. The chair blew apart in its stead.

I pursued and, guessing the creature's next move, aimed my staff at the near window. *"Protezione!"*

The light shield that spread over the glass held long enough for the shrieker to bounce from it. The shrieker launched itself at the window beside it, but I cast first. More sparks fell away as it beat its wings up and down the protected window like a flailing moth.

"You're not going anywhere, you little imp."

Only it wasn't so little anymore. The bed jumped when the shrieker dropped onto the headboard, taloned feet gripping the metal bar. The white caul over its eyes was thinning, too, goat-like pupils peering out. As I crept nearer, the creature's appearance stirred in me equal parts fascination and revulsion. Its wings spread to reveal a wrinkled body mapped in throbbing black vessels.

Okay, now it was just revulsion.

The shrieker put everything into its next scream. The light energy over my right ear broke apart. A sensation like shattered glass filled my head. Hunching my shoulder to my naked ear, I threw my weight into a sword thrust and grunted as hot fluid sprayed over me.

The shrieker fell silent, staring at me as though trying to comprehend what I had done. Its eyes fell to the sword, which had skewered its chest and driven a solid inch into the wall behind it. But it wasn't enough to physically wound such creatures. They had to be dispersed.

"Disfare," I shouted, concentrating force along the blade.

The shrieker's wings trembled, then began to flail. Unfortunately, the more power it took to summon a creature into our world, the more power it required to send it back. And the homeless appearance of the conjurer aside, some damned powerful magic had called this thing up.

"Disfare!" I repeated, louder.

The shrieker thrashed more fiercely, the tarry fluid that bubbled from its mouth drowning its hideous cry. But its form remained intact. And I was pushing my limits, a lead-like fatigue beginning to weigh on my limbs. The shrieker's wings folded down, and a pair of bat-like hands seized the blade.

"What the…?"

The creature gave a pull and skewered itself toward me.

"Hey, stop that!" I yelled pointlessly.

I pressed my glowing staff against its chin, but with another tug, the shrieker was an inch closer. It snapped at my staff with gunky teeth, then swiped with a clawed hand, narrowly missing my reared-back face.

I considered ditching my sword, but then what? I wasn't dealing with flesh and blood here. The second the shrieker came off the hilt, it would reconfigure itself, becoming larger and more powerful. And if it overwhelmed me, the conjurer would be next, followed by the head-bangers one floor down. An image of the party as a bloody scene of carnage jagged through my mind's eye.

"DISFARE!" I boomed.

A tidal wave of energy burst from my mental prism, shook down the length of my arm, through my sword, and then out the creature. I squeezed my eyes closed as the creature's gargling shriek cut off and an explosion of foul-smelling phlegm nearly knocked me down.

There was a reason I'd waterproofed my coat, and it wasn't for the shiny look.

I opened my eyes to a steamy, tar-spattered room and exhaled. The shrieker was gone, cast back to its hellish pit.

But at a price.

The edges of my thoughts swam in creamy waves, a sensation that heralded the impending arrival of Thelonious. That incubus spirit I called up a decade ago? He was still around, clinging to my spirit like a parasite. Despite that he was thousands of years old, I pictured him as a cool cat in black shades and a glittering 'fro—probably because he shared a name with a famous musician. And my Thelonious had a jazzy way about him. As long as I didn't push my limits, I could keep him at bay. Cross that line, and I became a vessel for Thelonious's, ahem, festivities.

And yeah, I'd just crossed that line.

More creamy waves washed in. I would have to work quickly.

The demonic gunk was evaporating as I drew my sword from the wall. I cleaned the blade against the thigh of my coat, resheathed it, and then returned to the fallen conjurer. Still out. I shone my light over his table, pocketing samples of spell ingredients for later study.

"But where oh where is the recipe?" I muttered.

I stopped at the flaky ashes of what appeared to have been a piece of college-ruled paper. The spell must have contained an incineration component, meant to destroy evidence of its origin.

"Naturally."

Sliding my cane into the belt of my coat, I stooped for the conjurer. "Up you go," I grunted. His head lolled as I carried him into the bedroom. I set him on the mattress, arranged his arms and legs into a semblance of order, then shook out the sheet and spread it over him.

His mortal mind was blown, but not beyond repair.

I touched my cane to the center of his brow and uttered ancient Words of healing. He murmured as a cottony light grew from the remaining power in the staff. The healing would take time, which was just as well. In a few more minutes, I wouldn't be in much shape to question him.

"I'll be back in a couple of days," I told the snoring man.

The creamy waves crested, spilling into my final wells of free will. There was no good place to go now except away from people. I was turning to leave when my—or I should say, Thelonious's—gaze fell to the space beneath the bed. A half-full bottle of tannic liquid leaned against one of the legs.

I felt my lips stretch into a grin. *Bourbon*, Thelonious purred in his bass voice.

My final memory of that night, the fire of alcohol in my throat, was tottering down a hallway toward a shaking generator and the siren screams of a pink-haired punker named Blade.

Ooh, yeah…

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5

Swollen eyelids cracked open onto a room wall-papered in album jackets and cast in the gray light of morning. I was on a mattress on the floor, no doubt in the punk rockers' apartment. I managed to extricate my naked torso from a tangle of sheets and sit up. The room revolved, making my brain hurt.

"Sweet Jesus," I muttered, dragging a hand through my salt-stiff hair, then clamping my temples.

A mean smell of smoke lingered in my sinuses and beneath it, the cloying stink of last night's shrieker. Not a pleasant combo, especially when you threw in a cheap eighty-proof hangover.

At least the apartment was quiet, everyone probably still asleep.

I drew the sheets from my legs. Evidently, I'd managed to retain my boxers and a single gray sock. That didn't always happen. *Oh, wait.* I looked again. The sock wasn't mine.

Time to go.

I stood and began shuffling around in search of my clothes and cane. My goal was to get at least ten blocks away before anyone awakened. Lord only knew what Thelonious had gotten up to last—

"Morning," a woman's voice said.

I wheeled to find pink spikes of hair jutting from a narrow tube of bedding at the mattress's far side. The hair framed a face that, despite its resting surliness and dozens of painful-looking piercings, possessed a hard beauty.

My cheeks burned with blood. *Did we…? Had we…?*

She must have read my panic. "Relax." Thin, tattoo-stained arms emerged from the sheets and stretched overhead. She continued to speak as she yawned. "I don't do charity cases."

I felt my brow furrow. "Charity?"

She smacked on the last of her yawn. "I did fix your eye, though."

My hand floated to where the shrieker had gouged me. The place beside my right brow was padded with gauze and tape. "Thanks?" I said.

"Your stuff's over there." She jutted her spade-shaped chin, also pierced, at a wooden dresser in the corner. My clothes were folded neatly on top, my cane lying horizontally over the stack. "But let's get

one thing straight. *You* were responsible for the strip tease, not me."

Not knowing how to respond, I nodded meekly. I heard her resettle on the mattress.

"Hey, listen," I said, shaking out my trousers and stepping into them. I'd already swapped the gray sock for my own. "Blade, right? Whatever I did last night, Blade, I'm really sorry. I'm not normally like that."

I buckled up and patted my pockets, relieved to feel my wallet and keys. That didn't always happen, either.

"I don't know too many who are," Blade said in a smoky voice. "You're a real original."

"What exactly did…? Forget it. I don't want to know."

She smiled mysteriously and propped her elbows behind her. "So, what's your name?"

Inventing one felt like too much work. "Everson," I replied.

"And where does Everson dwell?"

"West Village." I jerked my head, though I had no idea which direction was which.

"Really?" Interest glinted in her dark eyes as she watched me configure my tie into a Windsor knot. "You strike me as, I don't know, more Midtown. When you're sober, anyway."

"I actually—" A dreadful realization struck me. I grabbed my mechanical watch from the dresser and stared at its face. "Oh, crap."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm late." I snatched up my coat and cane and made for the door.

"For what?" Blade was sitting up now, sheets pressed to her stark breastbone.

"My morning class."

Her brow wrinkled. "You're a student?"

"No," I called back. "Professor."

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6

It was a quarter past eight when I slipped into the hallowed halls of Midtown College, the first classes of the day already underway.

I stopped off in the faculty bathroom upstairs, where I kept a spare toiletry bag, relieved to find the room empty. There hadn't been time to go home, and I already knew by my reflection in the subway's scratched-up window that I looked a wreck. The bathroom mirror confirmed this with even more candor.

In the space of a minute, I pulled a wet comb through my hair, washed my puffy face, and jagged a toothbrush around my mouth. I finished with a few drops of Visine in each eye. The demon gunk had evaporated from my coat, but the same couldn't be said for the blood on my jacket collar. Rubbing it with a wet paper towel only smeared it around.

Maybe it was time to stow a spare set of clothes up here as well.

I arrived at my classroom to find Caroline Reid sitting at the head of the circular arrangement of desks, lecturing on something. Which was to say she was covering my ass again. She glanced over and caught me watching her through the door window. Her lips tensed into a smile that barely dimpled her cheeks and fell far short of her blue-green eyes.

Caroline was a brilliant scholar of urban history and affairs. Her classroom/office was adjacent to mine, which I think we both considered my blessing and her burden. More than once I'd entertained the thought of being more than friends, but I was smart enough to know *that* feeling wasn't mutual. Besides, she was currently seeing some accountant stud—an oxymoron, I know.

Caroline stood and smoothed her coffee-brown slacks as I opened the door. "And with that, I'll hand off to Professor Croft," she announced.

"Much obliged, Professor Reid," I said. "Truly."

She looked over my stained and crumpled shirt as she approached, her own shirt a neat beige blouse, waves of golden hair shifting over the shoulders. I adjusted the knot of my tie, as if it made any difference.

"Heads up," she whispered, when she'd drawn even. "Snodgrass is

on the lookout for you again."

My stomach sank at the mention of our department chairman, but I didn't let it show.

"Appreciate the warning," I whispered back. Her faint honey scent reminded me that for the last ten hours I'd inhaled nothing even remotely pleasant—and no doubt smelled the part.

"Just be careful," she said.

"Will do. And hey, I owe you for…" I nodded toward the classroom.

"All right, but this is the last time." She raised her slender eyebrows. "I'm serious."

She'd been threatening to let me hang for more than a year now, but I didn't dare point that out. Instead, I thanked her again, bowing slightly. She gave a final tight-lipped smile that said, *You're better than this*, before stepping out. That stung. Of course she knew nothing about my second job and how close the greater East Village had come to being shrieker meat.

I exhaled as I closed the door behind her and cane-tapped toward my students.

All six of them.

In the wake of the Crash, graduate students were less willing to spend their tuition money on courses entitled *Ancient Mythology and Lore*. I couldn't exactly fault them. There wasn't a glut of job openings in the field, something our department chair was all too happy to point out.

But the Order seemed to believe the course might attract natural magic users who, for various reasons, had fallen through the cracks. Indeed, given the current budget crunch, the only thing keeping me employed at Midtown College were my research grants, all of them from foundations just stuffy-sounding enough to discourage scrutiny. I'd long interpreted the grants as measures of the Order's pleasure with my work. Lately, though, the amounts had been dwindling. And teaching was my sole source of income.

"All right." I clapped my hands once and eased into a seat still warm with Caroline's heat. I'd left my satchel with all of my notes at home, and hadn't the faintest what was on the syllabus for today. "How did the reading go?"

I was already checking out as I asked, contemplating last night's demonic summoning and who might have supplied the conjurer the spell and to what end and what I would need to do to find out. It was serious business. I finally noticed the students' puzzled faces.

"What reading?" one of them asked.

"Oh. The, ah…" I twisted around to face the chalkboard I sometimes wrote on. Whatever I'd last scrawled up there was dated

September 14, and it was now late October. “Didn’t I…?”

“We’re still working on our literature reviews,” another student spoke up, sparing me further bumbling. “For our term papers?”

“Right.” I remembered now. “Excellent. And how are those going?”

I directed the question to a young woman sitting to my right. To my knowledge, no magic-born types had passed through my door, but every semester saw at least one overachiever. This semester it was Meredith Proctor.

“Me?” she asked, straightening her cat-eye glasses.

I nodded in encouragement. She was the one undergraduate student in my graduate-level course, and for good reason. She had the gift of gab and the smarts to back it up. Once she got going, I’d be able to slip back into problem-solving mode, *hmm*ing here and there in pretended interest, asking open-ended questions. It made me a less-than-exemplary professor, but there was demon magic afoot.

Meredith cleared her throat. “Actually, I found your thesis paper in the library—on the roots of medieval European beliefs?”

“Extra credit if you burned it,” I said to laughter.

“No, no, it was fascinating.” She blinked beneath her brunette bangs and leaned forward. “I was hoping you could tell us about it.”

Well, that went nowhere fast.

“Please?” she pressed.

The paper to which she was referring had been a biggie, actually, placing me on the academic map. I still took a certain pride in it, even if it had chaffed some religious denominations. “Well, as a graduate student, I’d heard stories of an abandoned monastery deep in the Carpathian Mountains. Its founding monks were rumored to have transcribed several ancient texts believed lost. For my PhD dissertation I went to Romania in search of them.” I shrugged modestly. “Lo and behold, the stories were true.”

“That is so cool,” the lone male student, a goateed beatnik, said.

The other students nodded, faces rapt. Wizards’ tales tended to have that effect. I hadn’t told them the entire truth, though. I actually went to Romania looking for a certain occult book I hoped would uncover the mystery of who my peculiar grandfather had been—and who I was. Finding the other works in the monastery’s vault of forbidden texts had been a happy accident.

Meredith raised her hand, a hint of boldness in her fluttering fingers. “I was especially intrigued by your theory of that one legend being a precursor to the stories of the seven deadly sins.”

“Ah, yes. *The First Saints Legend*.”

I could see by the students’ intent faces that I was going to have to give at least a Cliff’s Notes version of the legend. I began by presenting an overview of the period in which the story had its oral

roots, in ancient Rome. The legend was later transcribed into Latin, deemed heretical for challenging the Biblical stories of Satan and Michael, and then lost to history.

"I read where a coalition of church leaders attacked your findings," Meredith said.

"Well, not physically," I replied, to another flutter of laughter. "But, yes, that's one of the occupational hazards of scholarship in our field."

"So what's the legend, Prof?" the beatnik asked.

"Right." I checked my watch. "In the earliest days, nine elemental demons were said to inhabit the world. They seeded discontent, sowed misery, and terrorized humankind. Not exactly stand-up guys. In response, the Creator sent nine saints, their virtues the antitheses of the demons' sins."

As I spoke, the students settled in. I felt the ley energy in the room drawing toward their circle of desks, as though listening too. I wasn't calling that energy. A wizard's story-telling voice, coupled with an interested—and, yes, impressionable—audience, was usually all it took.

"For hundreds of years," I continued, "the two sides battled until there remained only three demons and three saints. They battled for a millennia more. Demons held the advantage during the dark of night, the saints during the day. Similarly, the demons gained ground in the winter months, when the world turned dark and brittle." A subtle chill descended, and Meredith hugged her arms. "The saints did the same in the summer months, when light and life prevailed."

Though I didn't describe the battle in words, I could sense my students slipping out of time, experiencing the struggle on a deep limbic level. Their pupils expanded beneath hooded eyelids.

"At last, they agreed to an accord," I said. "Both sides would retreat from the world and no more involve themselves in matters of humankind. But it was a trick. Following the agreement, the demons slew two of the saints." Several students flinched. "The third and most powerful of the saints, Michael, escaped. He represented Faith. Through his strength and virtue, he ultimately overcame and banished the three remaining demon lords: Belphegor, Beezlebub, and, finally, the terrible demon Sathanas, who represented Wrath."

"Sathanas was the precursor to Satan," Meredith said in a distant monotone.

"In the traditional sense, yes," I replied. "Saint Michael's work wasn't done, however. During their time in the world, the demon lords had taken many human concubines, their offspring precursors to the night creatures: vampires, werewolves, ghouls, other monstrosities. In answer, Michael wed a peasant girl, and they began a

family of their own. Their sons and daughters became the progenitors of powerful lines of mages meant to balance the darkness of the night creatures."

I wasn't about to tell my students that I was a descendant of one such line. But it was true—on my mother's side. Sensing I needed to wrap up, I began expelling energy from the circle.

"So, the *First Saints Legend* gave rise not just to later versions of the seven deadly sins—even though there were nine original demons—but to many of the creature and magic myths that persist to this day. Indeed, they're all around us." *Much more literally than you kids realize*, I thought, glancing at my watch. "Oops, we went over again."

I clapped sharply to break the remaining energy in the circle. The students started as though coming out of trances, which they were.

"Keep working on those lit reviews," I said as they stood and gathered notebooks and backpacks. "I have to cancel office hours tomorrow, so we'll meet again Monday afternoon." That would clear my schedule to follow up on last night's summoning and learn exactly what I was dealing with.

I waited for the students to file out, Meredith's gaze lingering on me from the hallway, then grabbed a folder of ungraded student papers from my desk, tucked it under an arm, and aimed for the door myself. I had just locked up when a prim voice sounded behind me.

"Well, if it isn't the elusive Professor Croft."

Recalling Caroline's warning too late, I closed my eyes and exhaled through my nose.

"Professor Snodgrass," I said.

"Can you can spare a minute, I wonder?"

Not really, you self-important jerk.

"Yeah, sure."

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7

With a priggish clearing of his throat, Professor Snodgrass settled behind a behemoth desk that swallowed his five-two frame, making him look like a boy playing in his father's office. In many ways, he was. Family connections, and not scholarship, had elevated him to chairman of the history department. He adjusted his plaid bow tie, then clasped his small fingers on the desktop.

"We have a problem, Professor Croft."

"Is that right?" I dropped into one of the ridiculously steep wingback chairs facing him.

"Several, I should say. For starters, you were late to your own class again."

"The subway broke down."

His right eyebrow arched. "Your colleagues had no trouble arriving on time." He gave a pointed sniff. "They also managed to arrive without the stink of alcohol emanating from their pores."

"That's aftershave," I lied again. "Purchased from a street vendor, granted."

"And yet, you're clearly unshaven," he said, touching his smooth chin. I remembered my own jaw as it had appeared in the restroom mirror: steel-blue with bristles. He had me there. "And how do you explain the rumpled condition of your suit—didn't I see you in the same one yesterday? Or the unsightly stains on your collar. We have a professional code of appearance, you know."

I lifted a gunky shoe. "Do you think it's cheap keeping these kickers shined?"

I wasn't typically such a smartass. Or as much of one, anyway. My headache and underslept state had a lot to do with it. That and the fact he'd chosen the morning after a demon summoning to re-air his list of petty grievances—an event that would have reduced a man like Snodgrass to a shitting wreck.

Although the man was my boss, he had little power in the matter of hiring and firing, thank God. That responsibility rested with the college board. Whether or not they shared Snodgrass's low opinion of my character, they certainly liked the grants I hauled in. Not to mention that my student reviews were generally stellar. That no doubt

irked Snodgrass all the more. His department meetings put grown men and women to sleep, so I could only imagine what his students thought of him.

"I'm glad you find this all so amusing, Professor Croft," he said. "But some other concerns have come to light that go more to the heart of your role at the college." Snodgrass, who agitated easily, remained oddly composed. No lip twitching or obsessive fingering of his little oval glasses. Instead, he gave a knowing chuckle, which I did not like.

I fought the urge to swallow. "Such as…?"

"Well, you already know how I feel about your course. Ancient mythology and lore hardly qualifies as academia. It comes across as pop scholarship and more than a little … occultish."

I rankled at the suggestion, even coming from him. History might help explain the mundane world, but it was mythology that lent insight into the forces that *supported* the mundane—

"Given the present budget constraints," he continued, "as well as dwindling interest in your course, I made my recommendation to the board that it be dropped from the catalogue."

"Again?" I feigned a yawn.

His lips pinched, but not in irritation. He was trying not to grin.

That got me. Against my better judgment I pushed back. "And I'm betting the board reminded you that I bring in half the research grants of this department."

"Oh, let's not exaggerate," he said, clucking his tongue. "It's more on the order of thirty percent—and trending down. And there have been no grants so far this semester, am I correct?"

"They're pending," I muttered.

"But yes, the board *is* impressed by your grants. I'll give you that. What they're far less impressed by, however, is news of your criminality."

"My what?"

He lifted a stapled-together packet from a neat wire tray and tossed it forward.

Heat spread over my face as I lifted the packet from his desk.

"Last summer you were picked up at an apartment in Hell's Kitchen," he said. "The scene of a murder. You were in an intoxicated state. When you sobered, you claimed to know nothing, remember nothing. And yet the victim's blood was on your hands and clothes. The NYPD had their theories, but without a murder weapon or apparent motive, there was little they could do except charge you with obstruction. You're currently serving a two-year probation."

Hand to my frowning chin, I read over the police report, even though I already knew it line for line. Long story short, I had failed to get to a conjurer in time, then exhausted my powers banishing the

tentacled creature he had called up—not unlike what happened last night. Only in the Hell's Kitchen case, I failed to escape the scene before Thelonious took over and emptied the liquor cabinet.

I could feel Snodgrass's smirking eyes on me as I flipped to the court order.

I had foolishly believed these reports would remain buried beneath a growing mountain of unprocessed paperwork. Like most city services, the criminal justice budget had been slashed to the bone. Dysfunction and backlogging, problematic even in the best of times, had rocketed to new heights. For almost a year, the reports *had* stayed buried.

Meaning the son of a bitch had gone digging.

Snodgrass brushed the stiff lapels of his double-breasted suit with the back of a hand. "Shouldn't you have reported all of this to the college?" he asked.

I opened my mouth to suggest there was more to the story, but he cut me off.

"Save it for the board, Mr. Croft. I've proposed a hearing for Monday morning. You'll have an opportunity to make your case then. I suspect it will take more than another grant—or even a stack of fawning reviews—to convince them of your fitness to continue teaching here." His eyes sparkled with delight. "The board takes such matters *very* seriously."

I turned to the last page of the court order, which enumerated the conditions of my probation: remain in the state, no drugs or alcohol, consent to searches… The next item hit my memory like a cattle prod. I jumped from the chair. Snodgrass flinched back, as though I intended to knock him from his perch, but that wasn't where I was headed. Cane in hand, I spun toward the office door.

"Professor *Croft*," he scolded, recovering himself. "I haven't dismiss—"

"Save it, chief. Gotta run."

The window glass gave a satisfying rattle as I slammed the office door behind me. But it didn't change the fact I was late again. This time for a meeting with my probation officer.

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8

At the entrance to the subway station, I drew a deep breath. It was partly in anticipation of the stale-urine odor but more so that I had, well, a phobia of going underground. A skin-prickling, airway-constricting, almost full-blown anxiety. Not something I was proud of. The origins of the phobia weren't entirely clear. My therapist and I had been trying to get to the source before wizarding became too costly for me to afford him any longer. I still had his card somewhere.

I plunged down the stairwell and, approaching the turnstile, exhaled at the sound of a south-bound train squealing toward the station. Movement helped the condition. I swiped my transit card, hurried onto the platform, and boarded a rear car.

Edging to the back of a compartment crowded with the barely making it and the beaten down, I checked my watch. My meeting was at ten. If the track was clear, I'd be no more than fifteen minutes late. Not terrible—assuming my officer was in a good mood, which happened sometimes. If I had a cell phone, I could have called him, but wizards and technology? Yeah. Payphones were a surer bet, but I wasn't toting any change. Plus, there was no guarantee I'd get through the warren of extensions to his office.

If nothing else, it gave me something more immediate than my demotion to the bread lines to worry about.

At Fourteenth Street, the train lurched to a crawl. The Broadway line and its east-west services had been out for more than five years, doubling traffic on the Lexington line. Promises to have the routes restored had run into budget shortfalls, not to mention the mysterious disappearance of a team of surveyors. All sorts of theories had been floated regarding their fate—they got lost, suffocated on the foul air, etc.—but the stark, bone-crunching truth was that the defunct tunnels were now infested with ghouls.

Not my beat, thankfully.

At the stop for City Hall, I burst up into the gunmetal light and dodged the traffic on Centre Street. Beyond the municipal building, the cube-shaped fortress of One Police Plaza took shape. I was joining the line at the pedestrian checkpoint when a sharp voice called from my right.

"You're a half hour late."

I spun and nearly fumbled my cane. The woman striding toward me was dressed in a no-nonsense suit, black blouse, midnight hair pulled from a striking Latin face, one that managed to appear youthful and veteran at the same time. That was what Homicide did to a third-year detective, I supposed.

"Technically, you're in violation of your probation."

She would know. She was the one who had arrested me.

"Detective Vega," I managed. Hooking a thumb back the way I'd come, I stammered, "The subway, ah, hit a snarl."

"Save it." She seized my wrist with a small but manacle-tense grip. "Let's go."

I was resigning myself to arrest—could the day get any crappier?—when I noticed she was marching me away from the thirteen-story headquarters. I stumbled to keep pace, even though I had a good foot of height on her. My cane wasn't doing anything for her sympathy, apparently. We arrived beside a scraped-up sedan parked over the curb. Opening the passenger side door, she all but swung me inside. I raised a finger. "Um, where exactly are—?"

She slammed the door.

The driver side door cannoned opened, and she dropped behind the wheel. "I had the pleasure of meeting your department chair last week," she said, throwing the gearshift into drive. The car jumped from the curb and into traffic. "He told me you're a professor of the arcane?"

So that's where Snodgrass had gotten the report.

"Ancient mythology and lore, actually. It's a graduate-level course." Or *was*.

Detective Vega gave no sign she'd heard me as she swung south onto Park Row and switched on the siren. Cars honked and edged from her path. She accelerated, knocking past an obstinate taxi. Not even a backward glance.

"How are you with ancient languages?"

"Huh?" When I realized I was white-knuckling the door handle, I relaxed my grip and brought both hands to my cane. "Ancient languages? Not bad. I mean, I'm fluent in a couple, familiar with several others."

"Good."

I waited for more, but her dark eyes remained narrowed on the traffic in front of her. It was the same ruthless look she'd fixed on my court-appointed attorney while testifying against me last fall.

Police Plaza disappeared behind us. "Hey, uh, what about my meeting with the probation officer?"

Instead of answering, Detective Vega lowered her window. We

were entering the shadow of the barrier that separated the Financial District from the rest of Manhattan. I dipped my head to take in the grim concrete span. Following the Crash, public outrage had fallen on the banking class. Detonating bombs around their buildings had become a popular pastime.

Now Wall Street featured an actual wall again, even if it was located a few blocks north, on Liberty Street. No small irony there.

At an entrance for official vehicles, Detective Vega held up the ID that dangled around her neck. Armored guards in shield sunglasses looked from her to me, then motioned us through with assault rifles. The skyscraper-lined corridors beyond were strangely silent.

"There's been a murder at St. Martin's," Detective Vega said.

I stiffened. "The cathedral?" Sited on a fount of ley energy, it was the oldest and among the most powerful places of worship in the city.

"No, the Caribbean island," she replied, giving me a dry look. *And you're a professor?* it seemed to ask. I'd gotten that look a few times. "I'm not going into details other than to say the rector's body was found in the church sacristy this morning. There was some writing at the scene our language people couldn't make sense of. They're thinking it's ancient."

Well, that explained things. "And you want to see if I can decipher it?"

"Boy, you're sharp."

"What are you offering?"

When her eyebrows pressed together, I remembered how quick she was to anger. "Excuse me?" she challenged.

"You're contracting my services, right? Shouldn't there be a fee or something?"

While it was true I could use the extra money, this was about getting some things straight. First, probation or not, I wasn't hers to muscle around. I had enough going on in my own life at the moment. Second, we weren't friends. I didn't owe her any kindnesses. Especially since she was the reason I was about to get drop-kicked from Midtown College. If she wanted her back scratched, she was damn sure going to run her nails up and down mine.

Hmm. Probably could have phrased that better.

"Your *fee*," she said evenly, "is me not collaring your ass for failure to show. How's that sound?"

I shook my head against the rest. "Nice try."

"What?"

"You didn't know I was going to be late. You parked with a view of the checkpoint well before I showed up. Forty minutes, I'm guessing." I nodded toward the hood. "Engine was cold."

She glanced over as though taking some measure of me.

While it was true wizards possessed an enhanced awareness, catching subtleties that most overlooked, I was presently blowing an ass-load of smoke. I had no idea what temperature the engine had been.

"It doesn't change the fact you were late," she said.

She'd bought the bluff, but I could see she wasn't going to budge on her position.

"Well, what were you *preparing* to offer?" I asked.

She blinked twice quickly. A tell.

"All right," I said, drumming my fingers over my cane as I thought aloud. "You had no intention of paying me. I'm on probation, a criminal. I know how that would look—even inside the NYPD. I get it. So, I'm guessing it was some kind of commutation of my sentence?"

Another rapid blink.

"A year?" I pressed, my heart already accelerating at the possibility. A year would take care of the second half of my probation. I'd be a free man. And if, come Monday's hearing, I was no longer under the NYPD's thumb, I might actually have a crack at saving my job.

"A month," Detective Vega countered sharply.

My hope shattered like a clay pigeon. I could see in her set expression she wasn't going to let herself be talked into a full year. She already hated that I'd made her feel transparent. My mistake, I realized now.

We were slowing past a police cordon and into a mayhem of squad cars that fronted St. Martin's. Detective Vega knifed into a too-small space and twisted to look me full in the face.

"*If* whatever information you provide leads to an arrest," she said, "I'll consider upping it to six."

I understood some wizards could peer into souls. It wasn't a gift I possessed—or even desired, for that matter—but I *had* developed a decent ability to read people. And what I saw beyond the façade of Detective Vega's hard eyes was the bone-weary fatigue of a detective whose resources were being stripped at the same time murders in the city were soaring. She needed all the breaks she could get.

"A year," I tried again.

"Six months."

I glimpsed something else, but before it took on contours, Vega turned and banged her door into the squad car beside ours. Conversation over.

After edging out, she paced toward an approaching officer who looked to be managing the outdoor scene. When she pointed back in my direction, I squeezed out too, though with less property damage. I stood with my cane, peering at the cathedral's stately bronze doors,

then up the soaring Gothic spire shimmering with ley energy. Back down, to the right, tombstones stood in the gated churchyard I used to play in. I had attended St. Martin's as a boy, when my family still lived in the city.

"Hey!" Detective Vega had finished signing in with the officer and was waving for me to follow.

I eyed the wrought doors of the cathedral again, sweat breaking across my upper back. I mentioned my phobia of being underground? Places of worship were almost as anxiety-causing. In this case, though, it wasn't that such places repulsed me, but that I seemed to repulse them.

"Croft!" she snapped.

I watched her watching me, one hand bracing the strong curve of her cocked hip. Her NYPD shield glinted at her belt, and I could see the bulge of a sidearm holstered beside it, beneath her jacket. Six months was no guarantee of salvation, but it *was* half my remaining sentence.

I took a deep breath and made my head nod.

"Coming."

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9

My legs seemed to be hauling large iron balls as I ascended the three steps leading to the set of bronze doors. Detective Vega powered right between them, but I had to stop.

In addition to being places of worship, religious houses had a long history of providing sanctuary against evil. The longer-standing the house, the stronger the protection—especially if the house stood on a fount of ley energy. The protection was felt most palpably at thresholds, and St. Martin's threshold was all but thrusting me back into the street.

It wasn't that I was evil, but I had that little Thelonious problem. He wasn't demonic, per se, but as an incubus, he gave off a similar vibe. And thresholds weren't in the business of splitting hairs.

I peered past the doorway into the vaulted interior. Detective Vega was already passing through a propped-open set of glass doors to the deep pew-lined nave, where police personnel consulted and a few robed church officials drifted in monastic sorrow. Realizing I wasn't behind her, Vega turned and gestured sharply.

"*Croft*," she whispered.

At the sound of my name, one of the church officials raised his head and moved toward me. He wore a white tunic over a long black cassock. What looked like a grieving stole, heavy and dark, draped his neck. When his face swam from the gloom, I recognized him.

"Is that Everson Croft?" he asked, stopping a few feet from me. His parted red hair was going white, I saw. And he sported a trim beard now, denser around his lips, like an unintended goatee. But his eyes were the same seashell blue I remembered from childhood.

"Father Victor," I said, smiling.

He had been in charge of the youth programs when I attended, and I remembered him as good-humored and kind, a natural with kids. He had risen in the church ranks since, and word on the supernatural street was that he performed shadow exorcisms. My kind of guy.

"Please, I still go by Vick," he said. "How long has it been? Fifteen years?"

"Closer to twenty." I caught myself stubbing a toe against the concrete. Even though Father Vick's tone wasn't the least bit

insinuating, my long absenteeism still stirred up a cloud of guilt. I struggled to meet his eyes. “Listen,” I said, “I’m really sorry about your rector.”

I hadn’t known the man. The rector from my time had retired, his replacement coming from another diocese.

Father Vick nodded. “Yes. A terrible thing.”

“I’m actually here to help with the investigation, as a consultant.”

I peeked past him to where Detective Vega appeared on her last nerve.

Father Vick stepped to one side and made a humble gesture with his arm. “Please, do come in.”

At those words, the threshold relented. Invitations to enter calmed them. A clammy wave of nausea rippled through me as I stepped inside, but it was better than being burned like a square of toast. Even so, I felt a good chunk of my wizarding powers fall away.

That was something else thresholds could do.

Father Vick placed a comforting hand on my upper back and guided me into the nave. Something about his touch, which hummed with the supernatural power of faith, and the fact he was two inches taller than me, evoked memories of being a young parishioner here.

“Thank you,” I said, the sanctity of the cathedral reducing my voice to a whisper.

“I know you have work to do,” he said, “but I hope we’ll have the opportunity to catch up soon.”

He slipped a card into my hand as he left me with Detective Vega.

“Old friend?” she asked when he was out of earshot.

“Something like that.” I tucked his card into my pocket.

“Well, don’t get too cozy. At this point everyone in here’s a suspect.”

I snorted. “Reminds me of another case.”

She shot me a dark look. We both knew the NYPD hadn’t had sufficient cause to try me. But in their nigh-impossible campaign to clear cases, all sorts of protocols were being skirted, if not sledge-hammered. Though I hadn’t been charged with murder, getting the obstruction charge to stick had no doubt been sufficient to toss the case into the “good enough” basket.

“Here,” she said, clipping a plastic card to my coat lapel, the big NYPD letters stamped in yellow.

“Am I being deputized?”

She frowned. “This way.”

I followed her down the cathedral’s center aisle. To either side, muted light fell through steep Gothic windows. Ahead of us, a majestic stained-glass window glowed softly. During services, I used to study its depiction of hallowed saints and angels, one of them my

forebear, Michael. The sections of colored glass seemed to endow them with magic. With that pleasant memory came others: the smells of starched suits and faint perfumes, the warmth of the cushioned pew beside my Nana, her hand absently stroking my hair.

Grandpa had never joined us, for reasons I wouldn't understand until much later.

We climbed the wooden steps to the chancel, ducked under a ribbon of police tape, and rounded a cloth-draped altar. A pair of policemen stood guard at a door on the left. A table beside them held a set of cardboard cartons.

"The body's still inside, but it's covered," Vega told me. "We're waiting on forensics, so you'll need to put these on."

She had been yanking disposable gloves and shoe covers from the cartons and now shoved a pair of each into my hands. She had everything on before I'd even figured out the gloves. I had just pulled on the second shoe cover when a hairnet snapped over my ears. Detective Vega, in a blue hairnet of her own, stuffed my stray strands beneath the elastic with a studious frown that might have been endearing if she weren't going about the job so roughly.

She stood back and looked me over. "I hope I don't have to tell you that anything you see or hear is strictly confidential. You tell so much as your cat, and the deal's off. Got it?"

"Got it," I said.

I was pretty sure Detective Vega wasn't aware I owned a cat—much less one that talked.

"At least we know blood doesn't bother you," she muttered.

She was referring to the fact I'd been pretty well covered in it when she arrested me. *Good one, Detective.* Without waiting for a response, she stepped past the policemen and into the sacristy.

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10

I was only aware I'd begun to submit to the calming power of the cathedral when the room into which I followed Detective Vega blew the gathering quiet from my cells. I leaned against my cane, faint and breathless. Something must have come over my face as well.

"You all right?" Vega asked. "Need a mask?"

I shook my head. The smell of death was bitter, but it wasn't that. I blinked and moved my gaze over the small room a second time.

The white sacristy, where the holy services were prepared, was blood-smeared and ransacked. Cabinets had been opened, drawers ripped from their slots, candles, chalices, and vestments spilled. To my right, old ritual books had been removed from a vault and torn asunder, the brittle pages scattered. On the other side of the room lay the murdered rector.

I had seen bodies before—I didn't always get to amateur conjurers in time—but this wasn't a case of a nether creature feeding to sustain its form. No, the scene spoke to fury, and something far more troubling. Glee.

My ears picked up the police chatter outside, apparently filling in a newcomer:

"…gold chalice…" "…face beaten to a jelly…" "…don't hardly look like a person."

The white sheet covering the rector's body featured a spreading red-brown stain over a misshapen mound of head. At the end closer to me, the dusty soles of formal shoes were splayed downward.

Though I cleared my throat, my next words came out as scratches. "Where's the writing?"

Detective Vega stepped toward the body, the first time I'd seen her do anything gingerly, and lifted the sheet. I tilted my head. Having something to analyze helped. The words had been drawn vertically on his white-robed back, left and right sides. The ink of choice appeared to have been the rector's blood.

"Aren't there any photos?" I asked.

"They're being rendered," she snapped. "Mean anything to you?"

"Well, your people were right. It is ancient. A precursor to Latin, in fact."

"What's it say?"

I pulled a flip-top notepad from a coat pocket and slid a short green pencil from its metal spiraling. "The language isn't one of my fluencies, unfortunately." I wrote down the message, letter for letter. "It's going to take a bit of research."

Vega's eyebrows did the collapsing-down thing again.

I shrugged a *sorry*.

"You done?" she asked from her stooped-over position.

I looked over the writing once more and made a couple more notes. Despite the chilling medium, the penmanship had a certain elegance. Farther up the tent Detective Vega had made of the sheet, I glimpsed what looked like a sticky flap of scalp. I looked away and nodded quickly.

Outside the room, we dropped our bits of protective covering into a trash bag.

"How long?" she asked.

"To figure out the message?" I made a puttering sound with my lips. "A couple of days? It's a rare language," I explained before she could voice the protest gathering on her face.

She sighed harshly. "Any idea who else in the city would know it?"

"I'll add that to my honey-do list."

She fixed me with another warning look as she reached inside a jacket pocket. "I'm taking you at your word." Her first two fingers returned with a business card, which she held an inch from my face. "A 'couple of days' is Saturday. I'll expect a phone call by then. You don't want me to come looking for you."

"I can think of worse things." I flashed a grin.

The juvenile comment kept her chocolate-brown eyes on mine, which enabled me to accept the card with one hand while unclasping and hiding away the NYPD tag with the other. Classic misdirection.

Detective Vega didn't notice. After telling me I could find my own way home, she left me for her investigative team. I looked around for Father Vick as I descended the steps of the chancel, but the nave was empty now of church officials. Maybe they were being questioned.

At the bronze doors of the cathedral, another uncomfortable wave rippled through me, but my powers were back. Which got me thinking. The murder probably hadn't been the work of a supernatural entity. Even if one had managed to get itself invited into the sanctuary, the threshold would have stripped its powers. It wouldn't have been able to maintain its form inside.

So we were dealing with a human. And given the excessive violence of the act, likely someone with a vendetta against the rector. But then what did the message mean?

I pulled out my notepad as I started toward the Wall and re-read

my translation:

Black Earth

Yeah, I'd held back on Detective Vega. But to get those six months wiped, I needed to not only interpret the message but point her in the direction of an arrest. And that second part *was* going to take time. Fortunately, I had a resource in mind. I'd get that ball rolling while I worked on how and why a shrieker had been summoned the night before. Which reminded me, I would need to alert the Order.

I peeked back at the receding Cathedral of St. Martin, a beautiful, if haunting, anomaly amid the towering edifices of mammon, and sighed. Something told me it was going to be a long next few days.

Thank God for Colombian dark roast.

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11

I performed a quick check of my warding spells—all intact—before fishing out my keychain. Home was a walk-up apartment on West Tenth Street, its top floor small and square, like the top tier of a wedding cake, making it invisible from street level. Naturally, it was the floor I lived on.

I turned the three bolts, gold, silver, and bronze, stepped over my threshold, and immediately felt better. There was no greater contentment for a wizard than returning to his sheltered domicile—especially when the twelve hours I had been away felt like twelve days.

Contrary to other dimensions of my life, I took obsessive-compulsive pride in the order of my loft space. And thanks to New York's current vacancy glut, the rent was ridiculously reasonable, even for someone on my pay grade.

Of course, that could change come Monday.

For now, though, the industrial-chic apartment was home. I took in the space: high-ceilings with exposed beams, arched, double-story windows, and large throw rugs over stained concrete floors. A plush couch and chairs huddled around a flagstone fireplace, which I kept stoked from October to April. Beyond the kitchen, a ladder climbed to a second-story library and laboratory. There was plenty of open air for magic to move about. And in those rare instances when magic escaped my hold (hey, practice before mastery), the crooked West Village grid broke up the energy before it could do any real damage.

That gas explosion on Bleeker Street last month? Wasn't me.

As I hung my cane on the coat rack, a rattling snort sounded. On the divan beneath the west-facing window, a large mound of orange hair stirred. Ochre-green eyes slitted open followed by a yawning mouth of sharp teeth.

Damn, I'd woken the cat.

Her tail end heaved up before shifting ponderously and settling back down. I stood still and waited for her eyes to close again—they did that sometimes—but they stayed watching me.

"You smell like crap," she said.

"And it's nice to see you, too," I replied.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

“Hey! What did I say about the language?” It really was something I’d been trying to train out of her—without much success, obviously. Tabitha was, well, Tabitha: a succubus spirit who had been called up by an amateur and would have devoured *both* our loins had I not channeled her into a stray cat. Unable to decapitate the cat, per succubus-destroying protocol, I took her in. A questionable move, I’ll admit. But that was five years ago, and I still had all my parts. The Order had been none too happy, but what else was new?

Anyway, since then Tabitha had become less seductress and more harpy—and at forty pounds, a *lot* more harpy.

“Well?” she pressed.

“Well, things became a little more involved than anticipated.” I walked over to the kitchen, set the paper bag from the corner grocery store onto the counter, and began unloading it. “That summoning I set out for last night? It ended up being demonic. The fight left me drained, meaning Thelonious time. Ha. I’m sure *you* can imagine. That made me late for class, then late for a meeting with my probation officer. Well, the second was Snodgrass’s fault. The jerk.” I set the canister of coffee down harder than I meant to. “Oh, and get this—if I can’t help solve a murder by the end of the weekend, there’s a great chance I’m out of a job.”

I caught myself verging on full drama-queen. I looked at Tabitha for some sign of support, but her head had settled back onto her paws, eyes closed. At forty pounds, she was also becoming narcoleptic.

“Did you at least remember my milk?” she asked languidly.

I held up a bottle of raw goat’s milk—twenty bucks a pop—and gave it a bitter shake. Tabitha’s tastes weren’t cheap. Between that and the brandy-sautéed tuna steaks, she ate better than I did.

“And warmer this time,” she said, turning away.

“Not before you report on your tours.”

“All’s quiet,” she murmured.

In exchange for room, board, and her life, Tabitha was supposed to tour the broad ledge of the level below every two hours and report anything unusual on the street. To say her compliance was spotty was putting it nicely.

“How about that Thai restaurant going in across the way?” I asked. “Gaudy sign, huh?”

“Hideous.”

“There is no Thai restaurant.”

“It was raining. I couldn’t see very well.”

She wasn’t even trying to sound convincing.

“Yeah, last night and for like ten minutes!” I took several calming breaths. Tabitha’s no-craps-given attitude had a way of spiking my

blood pressure. “Look, it’s for both of our safety. Not everyone holds me in as high esteem as you do. And anything strong enough to smash through my wards isn’t going to turn gooey at the sight of a house cat. Especially one so … galling.”

Tabitha yawned.

I placed the bottle in the fridge and closed the door. Tabitha could get into a lot of things, but not the fridge.

“No report, no milk,” I announced.

The cat didn’t stir for a full minute. At last, she sighed heavily.

“Maybe I won’t come back,” she muttered, dropping from the divan with a graceless thud. At the neighboring window, she shot me a final slitted look before shifting her rump and squeezing through the cat door.

Tabitha not coming back would do wonders for my savings, but it was only noise. Besides the pull of endless goat lactose, she didn’t have the strength to break through my wards. Not that she’d ever tried. Like a tired married couple, we’d developed a begrudging dependency on the other. She would be as disappointed to never see me again as I would to never see her.

Of course, you’d have to tear out a few nails to get either one of us to admit it.

I poured half the milk into a small pot on the stove and lowered the burner to a guttering flame. Then, licking a finger, I decided to take advantage of the cat’s absence to make a call. (Tabitha had an annoying habit of providing background commentary.) I carried the desk phone from the counter to my favorite reading chair and rotary-dialed from memory. For wielders of magic, mechanical telephone switches trumped microchips every time. I’d fried more than my share of the second.

“Hello?” Caroline’s pleasant voice answered.

“Working late, Professor Reid?” I teased.

The voice fell flat. “Hi, Everson. Working, yes, but it’s not even two o’clock yet.”

“Really?” It felt much later, but I decided that saying so would make me sound like a loafer. Not an impression I wanted to reinforce, especially since I was preparing to ask her for another favor.

“What did Snodgrass want?” she asked first.

Though my colleague had lowered her voice to a whisper, her concern came through loud and clear. I felt a stab of guilt for evoking it and decided to play things down.

“Oh, you know. ‘Your class size is too small. You’re not a real historian. You’re a disgrace to academia.’ Same old refrains.”

“Are you sure that was all?” she asked skeptically. “He was practically skipping after your meeting.”

The image made my face burn. “The man probably found a discount on paperclips.”

Caroline laughed into the phone, a beautiful, effusive sound that always cheered me up. I imagined the backward spill of hair, the point-perfect dimples in her cheeks. She cleared her throat. “So, what’s up?”

“Well, without being allowed to say too, too much, something happened at St. Martin’s Cathedral last night, and—”

“You mean the murder?” she asked. “Isn’t that awful?”

“You know about it?”

“My dad told me.”

Of course. Caroline’s father worked as an attorney for the mayor’s office. I’d met him once, a barrel-chested man, iron hair combed back in severe lines, somber face. To hear Caroline tell it, he was the last honest broker in City Hall. That took brass. I wasn’t sure whether to envy the bastard who would one day ask for his daughter’s hand, or fear for the bastard’s life.

“Right,” I said. “Well, I was consulted for my knowledge of arcane languages—there was some writing at the scene, you see.” Oh, if Detective Vega could hear me now. “But I need some more info.”

“What kind?”

“Well, like who might have something against the church or rector.”

For time’s sake, I’d decided it was going to be easier to narrow down the suspects and see if I could link any to the message, versus starting with the message and performing the equivalent of a city-wide radial search. Caroline understood the city and its web of power brokers as well as anyone.

“I can think of a few,” she said after a moment, “but let me look into it.”

“Is lunchtime tomorrow too soon? We could meet at your favorite deli. My treat, of course.”

“That should be fine.”

“Hey, ah, I really appreciate you doing this.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you taking something seriously.”

She left out the *for a change*, but it was there, in her tone. Moments like these were when secret wizarding tended to suck the most. There were no explicit rules against my telling people what I did, but the less who knew about my other life, the better—for their sanity as much as for my safety. I didn’t have time to dwell on the question after we hung up. While Caroline was working on her list, I would need to get started on the shrieker case.

But first things first…

My cat had been right about one thing, I thought as I shed my coat

and shoes and shuffled toward the shower.

I did smell like crap.

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12

My first stop upstairs was a table that held a hologram of the city. Purchased from an architect friend of Caroline's, it was as marvelous to me as any magic. From the great upthrust of downtown to the relative plains of the Villages to the spires of Midtown and the wilds of Central Park, it was all there: every ghostly street and structure, shown to scale.

And fortunately, all presently dim.

Through magic, I had bound the hologram to a series of wards placed throughout the city by the Order. If the wards detected so much as a whiff of taboo magic, a red light appeared. The light effect was accompanied by a fog-horn, more psychic than auditory, so I could hear it even when away from home. It was then up to me to hunt down the offender.

Last night the ruins of the East Village had lit up like hellfire. That should have tipped me off to the magic's demonic nature.

I stepped over a silver casting circle and emptied what I'd gathered from the conjurer's apartment onto an iron table that ran along the railing of the loft space. The spell elements I inspected were common. The power for the spell must have been in the ritual and incantation.

I turned around to a steep wall of mundane books.

"Svelare," I said.

In a rippling wave, encyclopedias and classical titles became magical tomes and grimoires, the majority of them handwritten in lost languages, centuries old. Some of the very titles I labored to keep out of the hands of amateurs. I scaled the rolling ladder, walked my fingers over binders, and returned with a small stack of reference books dealing with demonology and subterranean beings. I spread the books over my corner desk and spent the next several hours deep inside them, emerging only for swallows of coffee.

When I closed the final book, I had some answers. Namely confirmation that the amateur conjurer hadn't acted alone. A shrieker summoning required the power of a magic born or a higher demon. And since there didn't seem to be any of the second bandying about, I was putting my money on the first.

I drew a piece of parchment paper from a drawer, dipped a quill in

lampblack ink, and began penning my report to the Order.

To the Esteemed Oracular Order of Magi and Magical Beings,

Re: Amateur Magic/ Summoning
Urgency: High

(They were very particular about how these were to be composed: part Jane Austen, part inter-department memo.)

I. Practitioner: Apparent AMATEUR. Middle-aged male of minimal means. Name unknown. No identification found. Domicile apparently settled by occupation versus lease or purchase. Due to post-conjuration mental state, AMATEUR could not be immediately interviewed. Healing initiated.

II. Location: Avenue C, East Village, New York City, United States

III. Source of Magic: Unknown at this time (see above, I). AMATEUR appears to have conjured from common components, but spell was incinerated, likely to obscure origin. ADVANCED MAGIC USER suspected. Plan to interview AMATEUR following full restoration of senses. Estimated recover time: forty-eight (48) to seventy-two (72) hours.

IV. Creature summoned: SHRIEKER

V. Outcome: Banished

(I decided it better to leave out the specifics, especially the part about Thelonious.)

Unless otherwise instructed, I plan to pursue the investigation into the origin of the spell and will report further discoveries as I attain them.

Humbly Submitted,
Everson Croft

I reread the report and, satisfied it was sufficiently informative and deferential, folded it into a six-sided disc. At my lab table, I waved the hexagon over a silver cup with a plum-colored flame: my direct line to the Order.

"Consegnare," I said.

The report smoked, then went up in a bright flash.

The flame in the pot shifted to orange before returning to its plum-colored hue, telling me the message had gone through. The tension in my neck and shoulders let out a little. There would be more work on the case, but I would have the Order's muscle in my corner—even if it was the slow-twitch variety. And who knew? Maybe this would be my break, the case that would promote me from the wizarding basement, as it were. Ten years was starting to feel like long enough.

I checked my watch, surprised at the late hour. It was nearly ten.

"Don't bother fixing dinner." Tabitha hopped onto the end of the iron table and collapsed on her side. "I fended for myself."

"Fended?" I asked before spotting the tuft of gray feathers stuck to a corner of her mouth. "*Pigeon?*"

"What else is a girl threatening to be shoved out the door supposed to do?"

Translation: *See how low you made me go*.

I snorted a laugh. "So it's gone from 'Maybe I won't come back' to 'He's throwing me out'?"

"Gotta survive somehow," she went on in her hurt voice, as though she'd been done a terrible injustice. She stopped talking long enough to tongue-probe a back tooth. "I think I cracked a molar."

Translation: *You made me crack a molar.*

I didn't need to look to know her molars were fine, but since ninety percent of any relationship was knowing when to argue and when to accede… "I'm sorry," I said. "Let me see about putting some magic to it."

"You'll just make it worse," she pouted, turning her head away.

The other ten percent was knowing when neither one did any good.

I sighed and began returning the research books to their dusty slots. I could feel her succubus eyes on the back of my head. "Aren't you going to ask for my report?" she asked after a moment.

"Do you have something?" I said from the ladder, trying to appear more interested in the title of the book I was holding. When her voice took on that dangling quality it meant she *did* have something.

"Oh, I might've caught someone watching our building."

Cold fingers brushed the back of my neck. "Man or woman."

"Hmm. You can never tell these days, can you?"

I turned. "Which did it *look* like?"

Tabitha licked a paw and began combing it over an ear. After several passes, she blinked up at me. "Did you say something, darling?"

"Man-looking or woman-looking?"

"Couldn't see much beneath the coat, but given the long hair … woman-looking."

I flipped through a mental Rolodex of women who might come calling—or who even knew where I lived. Of course, there were locating spells for the second, assuming the female in question had a magical bent. But I narrowed it down to the mundane: Caroline Reid or Detective Vega, one bearing a gift of info, the other coming to demand it. But why not just walk up? Or call, for that matter?

"When?" I asked.

"Couple of hours ago."

"What did she look like?"

"Average in every way."

I leveled my gaze at her. "If that were any less helpful, it might actually be helpful."

Tabitha gave a self-satisfied smirk.

"Young or old."

"Young but older-looking."

"Blond-haired or black?"

"Brunette."

I could tell Tabitha was tiring of the game because her eyes had closed and she was giving responses more freely. But I was no closer to who the woman might have been. Based on hair color, Reid and Vega were out. Still, call it wizard's intuition, whoever it was *had* been watching for me.

I would need to find out why.

"All right, if she shows up again, try to pick out a defining feature or two." I slid home the last book. "Better yet, let me know right away." I turned and found Tabitha fast asleep.

I shook my head, but maybe it was time for me to do the same. After the day I'd had, I could use a solid twelve. Back at my desk, I grabbed my empty coffee pot and mug. The downstairs lights were glowing warmly up the unit's tall windows. Somewhere on the Hudson, a ship's horn sounded.

No, wait…

I spun to face the city hologram, and nearly choked.

Not a ship's horn, my alarm. The hologram was glowing that hellfire red again.

This time in two places.

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The narrow streets of Chinatown were deserted when the cabbie dropped me off forty minutes later. I tipped him the requisite one hundred percent for the after-dark run—the "danger premium," New Yorkers called it.

Aptly named, I thought as the cab motored off. Of course most New Yorkers didn't know what horrors *truly* lurked in the dark, lured by the city's vortices of ley energy and, more recently, a muddy fog of despair.

I took a moment to get my bearings. The street that bustled with commerce by day was now an aisle of rolled-down steel doors, business names painted across the top in red Chinese characters. Some were accompanied by Oriental signs against evil. Above, lights glowed in solitary apartment windows.

As I began walking, I noted that the sidewalks were infinitely cleaner than those in the East Village, thanks to the crime syndicate that ran the neighborhood. Besides dealing in the usual vices, the White Hand profited by taxing local businesses and residents for "protection and services," which evidently included trash pickup. Of course, failure to pay meant your head would be in the next day's pile.

The White Hand didn't care for outsiders, either, especially after dark. I would need to tread carefully.

I was on the block where the ward had been triggered. The hunting spell I cooked up had been necessarily hasty—and I'd had to make two of them, the second for the alarm up in the One Forties—but with no rain in the forecast, it had a good chance of holding together.

At that thought, a fish-like force wiggled my cane, tugging me northward. I obliged at a run.

Half a block later, the force twisted me into an alleyway stretching between two restaurants and ending at a Dumpster. Chunks of pavement were piled up against the Dumpster's brown metal side, as though someone had jack-hammered down to a water main and left the mess for somebody else to clean up. I slowed and sniffed the air. The demon stink from the night before remained a stale after-scent in my sinuses, but it seemed I was picking up a fresh wave.

Not as powerful as the night before, but…

Ahead and to my left was a green door, pieces of glass glinting over its stoop. Beside it lay a twisted window cage. I raised my eyes to the dark socket of a window two floors up. From the jagged outline of broken glass, the same blood-red haze I'd seen the night before was leaking out.

I drew my cane into sword and staff and peered around, heart thumping rabbit-hard in my chest. The alley was still, but whatever had been summoned was loose in the city, dammit.

I blew open the locked green door, entered a narrow stairwell, and ascended quickly. At the second floor, I opened a door off the landing and held out my lit staff.

"Good God," I muttered.

Inside the apartment's one room, I assessed the grisly scene at a glance: the spell circles, done in salt this time, the familiar ingredients, the burned parchment, the gunky trail leading beneath the kitchen sink and eventually to the window, where the shrieker had flapped to freedom.

I went to the fallen conjurer.

His mouth was agape, his dark eyes rolled upward, as though trying to see something atop his head. Or maybe he hadn't wanted to watch what was happening down below. His ribs shone pale white around the hollowed-out bowl of his torso. The shrieker had consumed everything.

With gloved hands, I searched through his pockets for identification. Nothing there, but in a wallet on a back table I found a driver's license. The face was a match.

"What did you get yourself into, Chin Lau Ping?" I muttered as I copied his name into my notepad.

By his other IDs, I gathered he'd driven an intercity bus. I took a final look at the photo before returning the wallet to the table. The trim-haired man couldn't have been more different than the East Village vagrant, and yet the two had somehow gotten their hands on the same spell. Despite needing to get to the other summoning, like an hour ago, I made a quick circuit of the apartment.

Something had to link the two.

I stopped at a bamboo bookcase with a mirror on top and shone my light over the titles. But it was the standard amateur fare: religious texts, lay spell books, an encyclopedia of channeling and divination. Nothing that would contain the dark secrets of demon summoning. And why shriekers?

At the window, I peered past the broken frame into the night. I listened for bloody screams but heard only distant car horns and sirens. With any luck, the creature had gone into a second gestation.

I would need to alert the Order of the development, but first I had to get uptown.

I returned to the alley at a run, shoes crunching over the broken window glass. I sensed movement an instant before my vision exploded in stars. The blow only registered as I was landing on my face.

Something solid had struck the back of my head.

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I twisted and blinked up at my attacker. The looming figure was hard to make sense of. It was as though someone had taken the chunks of pavement beside the Dumpster, assembled them into the proportions of a large human, and endowed them with life. I peeked past the figure. Sure enough, the pavement pile was gone.

Wonderful. I was dealing with a golem.

With a low moan, the golem raised a giant fist. I might or might not have screamed as I threw myself from its trajectory. Pavement exploded behind me. I gained my feet and staggered backwards, sword out. The blow had turned my legs to noodles, but my mental prism remained intact.

"Vigore," I cried.

The force from my sword destroyed the golem's right arm, which went knocking down the alleyway. But though the golem rocked back, its legs held fast. It lumbered forward and swung its remaining arm. I got my light shield up in time, but the concussion from the backhand sent me into a brick wall, dealing my head another lovely smack. The alley tilted one way and the other before I could stare it straight again.

"Forza dura!" I shouted.

With my prism wavering, the force wasn't up to the task of a charging golem. Though chunks blew from its torso, the creature hardly slowed. I wheeled and staggered toward the mouth of the alleyway. I needed some kind of backup, but from whom? The city was sprinkled with magic users, but I had no idea who did and didn't belong to the Order—which was just how the Elders seemed to want it.

As I cleared the alley, an idea struck me: Canal Street, just north of here. A branch of the defunct Broadway line ran beneath it.

I veered right. Seconds later, the golem's smashing footfalls fell in behind me.

Pumping my cane like a relay baton, I remembered an account of a dark sorcerer using golems to protect his spell-casting sanctum. That had to be it. Someone knew last night's shrieker summoning had been thwarted. Looking to avoid a repeat, he had not only arranged for

tonight's twin summonings at opposite ends of the city, but placed a golem at the closer one, perhaps as a component of the shrieker spell, for any wizards who might come sniffing around. My stepping over the conjurer's threshold had probably triggered the animation.

But how had the person known I was closer to Chinatown than to Harlem? Unless he knew where I lived. I thought of the brunette woman Tabitha had seen watching my building.

Did the woman play a role in this? Was *she* the sorcerer?

I snuck a peek over my shoulder and regretted it. The thing was less than a half block away and gaining, its clunky strides literally eating up concrete. But I'd reached Canal Street. I took a hard right and began squinting ahead for…

There!

I aimed my sword toward the subway vent that took up half the sidewalk. With a shouted Word, I blew it from its foundation. Tight-roping the ledge between the sudden hole and a storefront, I gathered more energy to my prism, hoping to hell the golem would play follow-the-leader.

When I turned, it was. Sort of.

Instead of veering around the hole, the golem had chosen to stretch a clunky leg across. I aimed my sword at its front foot.

"Vigore!"

As foot touched sidewalk, the golem's leg erupted at the shin. With a surprised moan, the rest of the golem plummeted from view—only for stony fingers to reappear and seize the ledge. But a second Word demolished its hand, and I watched the golem crash-bang down into the foul-smelling void.

Head still ringing, I stooped over to catch my breath. Then I replaced the steel grating over the hole and hemmed the mess in with some nearby construction barricades that littered the city. Far below, the retching, rumbling battle was already underway. Ghouls versus golem.

With any luck, my new friend would land a few solid shots before being torn apart. In any case, it was on its own.

I had a ride uptown to catch.

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As it turned out, I hadn't needed a hunting spell to locate the site of the second summoning. The small army of police cruisers did the job for me.

"This you, buddy?" the cabbie muttered as he pulled over. "Christ."

He hadn't been too happy about the address. Following the Crash, Hamilton Heights had fallen as hard as any neighborhood and was neck-and-neck with the South Bronx for most homicidal.

"You mind waiting?" I asked. "I won't be long."

The man's pouchy eyes jerked from building to building as though bullets were going to fly from them at any second. "Sorry, pal," he said, shaking his head at the extra twenty I held out. "I'm as hard up as anyone but not *that* hard up."

As the cab U-turned and took off back south, I hurried toward the crime scene, an unadorned brick apartment building, twenty-odd stories high. Several residents had gathered out front as police appeared and disappeared through the building's entrance. I eased up to the edge of the crowd and stood behind an older couple, both in thick night robes.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Flash got himself killed," the man said without turning.

"Murder?"

"Big old messy one," the woman said.

"Someone tore into Flash good," the man took up again. "Super found him after we complained of some ungodly screaming from his unit."

I imagined a similar scene to the one in Chinatown.

"Did they catch the guy?" I asked.

"Nun-uh." The man cocked his head up. "Broke out through the window, must've went down the fire escape."

"Either that or had wings," the woman put in, "cause the man live twelve stories up."

Yeah, nastiest wings you ever saw, lady. Which meant we had two shriekers on the loose.

"What sort of work did Flash do?" I needed to find some sort of

connection between the conjurers, a common cause. That the couple seemed to know the latest victim was to my good fortune—not something I fell into very often.

But instead of popping off another response, they turned around for the first time. Beyond their glasses, I watched squinting suspicions take hold. *So long, fortune.* Not only was I foreign to the neighborhood, but my face was freshly banged up. I followed the man's gaze to my gloves, both bloodstained from patting down the Chinatown conjurer.

"O-officer!" the man called over a shoulder as he backed his wife away. "Officer!"

"Now wait a minute," I said, showing a palm.

Bad move. Now the woman could see the blood. She responded with a piercing scream.

That would get someone's attention. Lowering my head into the shadow of my hunched-up collar, I wheeled and strolled south, Mr. Nonchalant himself. I kept an ear trained on the excitement of voices behind me. When I picked out "white man" and "killer," I decided to speed my pace.

To an all out sprint.

"Stop!" a woman's voice called.

Sorry, Officer, but being nabbed for a probation violation is bad enough. Being nabbed with the blood of another stiff on my hands, and without a good explanation of how it got there? Yeah, not gonna happen.

I rounded the corner of the building as a pair of cracks sounded behind me.

Of course, you could just shoot me dead.

For the second time that night, I was in full flight mode. I narrowed my sights on a south-facing entrance to the same apartment building. But instead of ducking inside, I pressed my back to the ninety-degree angle the jutting entrance made with the building's brick siding.

Holding my cane at chin level, I whispered a Word: *"Oscurare."*

As the police officer slapped around the corner into view, the white opal in my cane absorbed the immediate light. The shadow I stood inside turned darker, more obscuring.

Slowing, the officer snapped on a flashlight and held it level with her firearm. The beam swept side to side, then shot under a pair of stripped cars leaning curbside. Ninety-nine percent of the current force would have said, "The hell with it," backed away, lived to police another day. Hamilton Heights at night was no place for a cop to be caught alone. But it seemed my pursuer belonged to that hallowed one percent who still believed in Serving and Protecting.

Lucky me.

At that thought, the beam glared across my face. The officer began

running my way.

Not *officer*, though—*detective*. As in Vega.

I felt explanations bunching up in the back of my throat, none worth a spit. To Detective Vega, I was just another degenerate in a city running over with them—not someone trying to help clean up the mess. Nothing I said would change that. Even in the dark, I could see her glossy black eyebrows creasing sharply down.

But she wasn't hitting me with the light anymore. The beam was trained on the entrance I was hidden beside. She hurried past my spot and disappeared. I listened to a large door shake but remain locked. Detective Vega huffed out a sigh. The beam swung around, this time into the street.

My knees buckled in relief—until a pair of male officers came running up, their own flashlight beams wavering dangerously close. I stiffened straight, wondering how long I could hold the spell.

"Find him?" the larger officer asked.

"I think he went in," Vega said from just out of sight. "Locked the door behind him."

"Want us to do a top-to-bottom," the other one asked, clearly uncomfortable with his own suggestion. Beside his partner, he looked like a twelve-year-old. They had chosen a spot five feet in front of me to hold their end of the meeting. If I reached out with my cane, I could have goosed either one.

"No." Vega joined the meeting in profile. "I want you to check on one of our probationers, make sure he's home."

You cannot be serious.

"What's the name?"

I closed my eyes. *Please, not—*

"Everson Croft," Vega said. "The address is in the system. West Tenth, I think."

"We're on it."

As the officers took off, Detective Vega gave the street another pass with her light. I'd tried to keep my cane concealed while fleeing, but I hadn't been careful enough, it seemed. She must have seen it. At least my cane was doing a better job of concealing *me* at the moment.

Detective Vega lowered her light. Something in the disappointment, if not defeat, of the gesture poked me right in the sympathy center. My own night wasn't going much better. Under different circumstances, I might have pulled her into a hug. Then again, Vega didn't strike me as a cuddler.

Gun in hand, she stomped back toward the front of the building, a muttered threat trailing behind her.

"And if you're *not* home, Croft…"

All right, sympathy time over. If I didn't want to learn the second

part of Vega's threat, I needed to figure out how to race a speeding police cruiser one-hundred thirty blocks south.

And win.

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I ran south for several blocks before cutting west.

I'd already eliminated the subway as an option. Too unreliable. My plan was to flag a cab, empty my wallet onto his lap, and have him turn the West Side Highway into his personal Autobahn. The police cruiser had taken off down Fredrick Douglass Boulevard a minute before, bottoming out at an intersection. I was gambling they'd hold that course, hopefully hit a traffic snag or twelve from Midtown south.

But for my plan to work, I needed a taxi. I pulled up wheezing at the edge of St. Nicholas Park, where the danger factor lessened slightly, and peered down the street to the glowing entrance of a metro stop.

Not a single cab.

"Oh, c'mon," I shouted in frustration, "it's not even a full moon!"

Our wooded parks had a bit of a werewolf—or blood-thirsty feral dog—problem, depending on who you talked to.

I sized up the few cars parked along the curb. Even if I could've hotwired one, I wouldn't have known how to drive it. (Hey, I grew up in the city). That left hijacking the next vehicle that happened to pass. Or acting like a wizard.

Ducking tree branches, I hurried up a cement staircase into the park. The path it led to was little more than a crumbling line of pavement, quickly swallowed by a decade's worth of overgrowth. Joggers, bikers, and strollers—not to mention the Department of Parks and Rec—had long since abandoned St. Nicholas to its new denizens: an assortment of shadow creatures and the occasional junky desperate enough to shoot up back here.

I didn't go far, veering off path to scrabble over an eruption of boulders. Inside, I discovered a small dirt-packed clearing. As any druid would tell you, mineral-rich stones made good energy containers. I kicked aside some soiled clothing, drug needles, and what might have been a human femur and looked around. It smelled like a Porta-Potty, but the space would do for my spell.

Using the tip of my sword, I drew a man-hole sized circle in the dirt and inscribed my family symbol inside: two squares, one offset at forty-five degrees to look like a diamond. I connected the corners with

four diagonal lines and scratched a sigil at each end. From inside my coat, I pulled out a tall vial of copper filings and sprinkled them along the furrows. To connect the circle to the spell target, I removed three keys from my jangling chain—one gold, one silver, one bronze—to correspond with the three locks on my door. I arranged them near the edges of the casting circle in a triangular pattern and stood back.

The spell would require energy, and lots of it. That was where I had to be extra careful. I couldn't afford to let Thelonious through the door. Not tonight, and *definitely* not out here, where night hags were rumored to wander. Thelonious had chased skirts more putrid, believe me.

"All right," I said, shaking my arms loose.

I was about to attempt a projection spell, one that would manifest a walking, talking likeness of me at the target. Besides requiring a healthy dose of energy, they were tough as hell to get right, especially over long distances. Even then, they were ephemeral. Though I'd practiced the spell countless times, I could count on one hand the number of times I'd put it into actual practice.

Let's just say the results had been a mixed bag.

I stepped into the center of the circle and, feet together, began to chant an ancient Word that translated into *home*. As the sound vibrated in my core, I pictured the inside of my door as vividly as I could: the molding, the glass peephole, the brass knob. I imagined the feel of the shag rug under my feet, the cavernous space of the loft at my back.

With every chant, ley energy surged voltage-like through my mental prism, down my body, and into the casting circle. There it coursed along the lines of my symbol, glowing whiter, gaining strength.

Within minutes, it became a self-sustaining force.

"Oikos," I repeated.

A high resonance began to ring from the door keys. A moment later, the inside of my door wavered into being, a ghost image over the blacked-out park. I was taking shape in my apartment. I channeled more energy, imagining away my bulky attire, replacing it with the cottony feel of pajamas and the loose grip of tube socks.

"Oikos."

I was putting the finishing touches on my bed-headed coif when a knock sounded.

"Mr. Croft?"

I'd managed to beat the police officers, but only just. I waited the requisite ten seconds for them to imagine me waking up, climbing out of bed, crossing the room…

A harder bout of pounding. "Mr. Croft, it's the police."

“Coming,” I called, my voice strange-sounding, as though I were hearing myself from the opposite end of a tunnel.

I extended a pajama-clad arm forward and twisted the bolts, the hard feel of them also seeming to arrive from a hollow distance. The two officers I’d been hiding from only a short time before appeared in the opening doorway. I blinked between them blearily.

“Mr. Croft?” the larger one asked from a lumpy boxer’s face.

“Last time I checked…” I read his name tag. “Officer Dempsey.”

The two officers took a moment to examine me, no doubt lining up my features with the stats and mug shot on their dashboard computer. The other one’s name was Dipinski, which also seemed to fit him. Something in their stares told me I wasn’t dealing with the department’s sharpest tacks. From experience, I knew that could cut either way.

“Help you with something?” I asked.

Dipinski, whose eight-point police hat barely reached the height of my chin, stepped forward. “Have you been home all night?”

“I have, in fact.” I stifled a fake yawn and gestured vaguely behind me. “Was grading papers till about ten and then conked out.”

Their eyes darted past me as though eager to find something amiss. I turned with them, mostly out of curiosity. The apartment, superimposed over the park’s boulders, was as neat as I’d left it, Tabitha curled up on her divan, dead to the world. That was one less worry, anyway.

“Well, consider this a random audit,” Dempsey said.

His partner aimed a finger up at me. “We come after eight at night and you’re *not* in, you’re in violation of your probation, bud. And then guess what? We’re going to take a little ride.”

Yeah, and had I goosed you with my cane back there, dipshit, you’d be duck-walking in those little polyester pants.

“Got it,” I said.

Dipinski glared at me as though trying to decide whether my curt response was meant as an insult. While it was true I held him in roughly the same regard as a peanut, I just needed these guys gone.

At last he lowered his finger and began to back off. That was when the image wavered.

Spent energy was leaving the spell, dammit, and I was in no position to resume incanting. Though I managed to steady the projection by force of will, Dipinski had caught the disruption. His small, freckled face pinched into a squint. Once more, the spell tried to tremble away.

“I don’t believe it!” his partner exclaimed, seeming to choke on his own breath.

I drew back before realizing he wasn’t looking at me. Following his

floating finger, I found Tabitha stretching and rising to her haunches.

"Is that a … *cat*?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, struggling to hold the spell together. "Name's Tabitha."

"Good gawd!" The fit of laughter that seized Dempsey sounded like dry heaving.

Dipinski gave a mean smirk. "You've got a real chubber there, Croft." Apparently, my plus-sized cat trumped a man flickering in and out of existence. As noted, not the sharpest tacks.

"Chubber?" Dempsey said, coming up for air. "That's the biggest fucking cat I've ever seen!"

That got Dipinski giggling.

Tabitha dropped from the divan, ears pinned.

"Hey, look, fellas," I whispered, trying to close the door enough to block her from their view and vice versa. "The cat gets a little weird around … you know … people she doesn't know."

Dipinski wiped an eye with a finger. "Bet that'd change if I showed up with a Christmas ham."

Their laughter verged on hysterical now.

"You'd better bring the whole damn pig!" his large partner wheezed.

"You'll do nicely," Tabitha hissed from right behind me.

"All right, thanks for stopping by." With what energy remained in my failing projection, I slammed and locked the door on the officers before Tabitha could sink her claws into them.

The image buckled and broke apart. I fell from the circle and landed seat-down in the dirt, blinking around at the sudden darkness. The scent of burnt copper hung in the cool air.

I sat a moment, waiting to see whether Thelonious would be paying our world a visit. But though the creamy light moved briefly around the edges of my thoughts, I had retained enough power to prevent him from breaking through. And expended just enough to keep my ass out of the clink.

I rose shakily, collected my singed keys, and swept the bottom of a shoe over the smoking circle. Some night. Two dead conjurers, two escaped shriekers. And I had a bad feeling that no matter what those two buffoons reported to Detective Vega, that image of me fleeing was going to remain stuck in her head. I wasn't sure what the implications would be. Certainly nothing good. If I'd had poorer outings as a wizard, none came to mind.

I returned to the street in a sulk, too slow to hail the on-duty cab motoring past. A moment later, the light over the metro entrance turned off. Sighing, I aimed myself south and started for home.

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17

"I am *so* sorry," I said as I slipped into the seat opposite Caroline Reid at the small deli table.

She was sitting arrow straight, which was her peeved posture. I seemed to make her do that a lot. In my defense, I trudged sixty blocks last night before finally snagging a cab. Back home, I had to calm Tabitha, who had been deep into scheming Dempsey's and Dipinski's murders, update the Order on the shrieker situation, and then shower and treat my injuries.

By the time I crawled into bed, it was almost four a.m.

"I don't get it, Everson," Caroline said. "*You* arranged this meeting."

"I know, I know, but—"

"*You* needed my help."

"Right, and I—"

"And yet where would you be if I hadn't called?"

The correct answer was still in bed. It wasn't my alarm, but the brassy ring of the telephone that had awakened me, Caroline wanting to know where in God's name I was. That had been an hour ago.

"Look …" I took a breath. "I know this is no excuse, but I had a rough night."

"You seem to have a lot of those. And while you were out doing … whatever it is you do, I was home working on this." She hefted up a thick manila folder and gave it a shake. "For you."

"And I appreciate that. I really do."

Lips compressed, she dropped the folder in front of me and stood.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"I have office hours in fifteen minutes." She fixed her purse strap over a shoulder. "Some of us take our responsibilities seriously."

"And I don't?"

"No, in fact. And you lied to me."

"*Lied?*" I was honestly at a loss. "About what?"

"Your meeting with Snodgrass. I know about the hearing."

Oh. Which meant she also knew about my probationary status.

When I didn't say anything, she shook her head and turned to leave.

“Wait.” I caught her slender wrist. It was a bold move given the hole I was already in, but she stopped. When she faced me, the hardness in her blue-green eyes told me I had roughly ten seconds to make my appeal.

“Okay. I was arrested last summer,” I said, releasing her carefully. “Wrong place, wrong time. Throw in a stressed public safety system, and I got two years probation on no evidence. I kept it from the college, probably the wrong move, but Snodgrass found out. As things stand, I’m in a tough spot, true. *But*,” I tapped the folder, “if I can point the NYPD in the direction of the cathedral murderer, my remaining probation gets halved. And with that, I can at least make a case to the board. I think they’d look favorably on a professor using the tools of his profession to help solve a crime. Good recruiting pitch, too.”

Carolina snorted dryly. But in her softening stance, I could see that if she didn’t believe me, she really wanted to. That was a start. She let me guide her back to the table and scoot her chair under her.

“What are we going to do with you?” she asked tiredly.

“Well, this will definitely help.” I indicated the folder as I sat.

“Not that.” She reached forward and brushed my sleeve. “Your coat’s inside out.”

I looked down. Damn.

“And what’s with the bandages?”

A waiter came over, sparing me from having to explain my injuries. I fixed my coat and ordered a coffee. Caroline asked for a refill of hers.

“Shall we?” she asked, clearing her throat and opening the folder of what she’d compiled. “I have about five minutes before I’ll be late.” When she scooted nearer, her clean scent washed around me. “I came up with two names. First, Arnaud Thorne, CEO of Chillington.”

The groan in my thoughts must have seeped out because Caroline looked up. “Know him?”

“By reputation,” I replied, which was mostly true. Arnaud Thorne epitomized the worst of investment banking. Cold, soulless, rapacious —the standard tags. His was one of a cabal of firms that had secured a nice pre-Crash profit betting against New York municipal bonds, undermining the city’s ability to pay its mounting debts. In the Crash’s smoking aftermath, the same firms swooped down on City Hall. Headed by Arnaud, they offered to manage the very debt they’d rendered worthless—but at crippling interest rates. They now had their teeth fixed firmly in New York’s jugular, ensuring themselves a steady stream of tax dollars for the next fifty years. New York, in turn, had become their mindless slave.

All very fitting considering the same investment bankers were

vampires.

"Why Arnaud?" I asked.

"Because St. Martin's Cathedral sits on prime real estate," Caroline replied, turning some pages over. "Here are the lawsuits Chillington Capital filed to have the cathedral's downtown block converted to commercial. The church and a collective of preservation groups fought back. When the lawsuits failed, Arnaud shifted his sights to the rector. I have it on reliable authority the two met last month. Arnaud offered Father Richard a small fortune to convince the diocese to abandon the downtown location. Richard said no."

"And yesterday morning he's found beaten to death," I finished.

Holding a knuckle to my lips, I leafed through the evidence. Vampires valued material assets but mostly as a means of self-preservation and control. Arnaud's interest in the property probably had more to do with the fount of ley energy it sat on—energy he could tap. I doubted Arnaud had committed the murder himself, though. He would have lost his powers at the threshold, if not been incinerated. Vampires didn't fare well in holy spaces. And St. Martin's was about as holy as they came. Of course, he could always have hired a thug to do the job.

Still, I needed a connection between Arnaud and the message on the rector's back. With last night's hoopla, I hadn't had time to research *Black Earth* or what it might mean.

"Who's the other one?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

"Wang Gang."

"Wang Gang?"

"He also goes by Bashi. He took over the Chinatown crime syndicate two months ago."

Something squeezed my stomach. "The White Hand?"

She nodded. "The former boss died in July."

"I *did* hear about that. Natural causes, right?" I'd read about it, actually, an image of the man's crinkly face and wispy white hair appearing beside the article. It hardly seemed fair that someone responsible for so much fear and death should be allowed to drift peacefully from his mortal coil.

Caroline continued. "Following a bloody struggle, the youngest son emerged on top. But where his father kept a kind of order, Bashi has spent his first weeks as boss sowing chaos, exacting revenge for every perceived slight."

"And one of his beefs was with the church?"

"St. Martin's took in ten girls last year who escaped a White Hand brothel. The young women had seen their handlers paying uniformed police officers and so feared going to the law. St. Martin's gave them sanctuary until they could be spirited from the city. Let's just say

Bashi took it as a personal affront when he found out. Before becoming boss, he was in charge of the prostitution rings."

"And the church didn't stay quiet," I said, recalling another news item I'd read.

"No," Caroline affirmed. "The church took the lead in trying to end the exploitation. Father Richard organized a community task force, offered money to informants, put pressure on the police department to crack down."

I nodded grimly. The story fit with murder as revenge. And because the White Hand was a mortal organization, the threshold wouldn't have been an obstacle. What didn't fit, however, was the message. When the White Hand left their mark on a crime scene, it wasn't in early Latin.

I flipped through photo-copied articles on Wang Gang and the White Hand until I arrived at the back of the folder. "So these two?"

"In New York, every office comes with a dozen or more spokes of conflict, but from what I was able to find, Arnaud and Bashi look the most damning."

Or damned, in the first case, I thought.

"What about within the church?" I asked. I was thinking about what Detective Vega had said about everyone inside being a suspect.

"St. Martin's wasn't afflicted with the political or liturgical conflicts you sometimes see in powerful religious institutions. At least not openly. Fathers Richard and Victor worked well together as rector and vicar." Not realizing Father Vick had been promoted to vicar, I made a sound of interest. Vick the Vicar. "Father Richard was well-regarded within the church hierarchy and larger inter-faith community, popular with his parishioners…"

I must have been watching Caroline with a little too much admiration because her cheeks began to color. She checked her watch, as though to give her eyes something to do.

"Now I really do have to get going," she said.

Shoot, I thought. "Just one more question. Have you ever heard of 'Black Earth'? Maybe the name of a fraternal organization, an underground society, something like that?"

If it existed, there was a good chance Caroline would know. She maintained an eclectic network of contacts throughout the city. Whether her contacts were cultivated for research purposes or something more, I wasn't sure and had never asked. Sometimes the best way to safeguard one's own secrets was to allow your friends theirs.

But a comma-shaped wrinkle was forming between Caroline's brows. "Not ringing a bell. I can ask around."

"No, no, please don't." The last thing I wanted was for her to draw

the attention of a dangerous group, especially if it had a supernatural bent. “More of a tangential question, really.” I forced a chuckle. “Not related to this here.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said, sounding unconvinced.

I stood up as she did, dropping a few bills on the table and tucking the thick folder under my arm. It suddenly occurred to me neither of us had eaten. Geez, and here I’d offered to treat her. “Oh, hey, can I get you a salad or sandwich from the cooler to take back with you?”

“No worries. I packed a backup lunch.”

“Backup…?”

When she patted my unshaven cheek, it was as though to say, *I know you by now*.

“Okay, well, I owe you,” I said lamely.

She gave a smile that could have been interpreted any number of ways and made her way toward the front of the deli. The afternoon light through the windows, though muted, enveloped her in a lovely aura, capturing my feelings for her in that moment. I opened my mouth, not knowing what I was going to say. But when it came to me and Caroline, there were only three words.

“Sorry!” I called. “Thanks again!”

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An hour later, having decided to begin with the vampire Arnaud, I was on a subway pulling into the heart of the Financial District.

I exited with a bevy of men and women in professional attire. Past the turnstiles, steel barriers herded us toward a checkpoint. We were inside the Wall. I watched those ahead of me showing their passport-like IDs. At a table beyond, an armed guard was rifling a man's briefcase while a second guard performed a rough pat down of a harrowed-looking woman.

I swallowed and fingered the police ID I had, ahem, forgotten to return to Detective Vega. I was still debating whether or not to use it when my turn came up.

"C'mon, c'mon," a guard grunted, holding out a hand. He wasn't your typical paunchy retired cop. With his walnut-knotted frame and shaved head, the man looked like a special ops agent. They all did. And why not? The titans of finance could afford the most lethal.

Almost reflexively, I jerked the NYPD card from my pocket. The guard snapped it from me and held it in front of his shield sunglasses —worn underground as well, apparently. Through the window of a booth to his left, I could see someone inspecting an X-ray scan of my body.

"What's your business?"

"The, uh, St. Martin's case."

"This doesn't say who you are," he growled.

I fumbled for my wallet. "Everson Croft, Special Consultant to the NYPD." I finally managed to free my Midtown College ID, which I held up as well.

The guard wasn't interested. He slapped the NYPD card against my chest, hard enough to alter my heart rhythm, and shoved me toward the inspection station. I stumbled against the metal table, where I was rudely deprived of my cane. I watched the guard inspect either end and then try to pull it apart. *Good luck, buddy.* A family charm held it closed. More worrisome, though, were the hands prodding my personal areas and digging into my pockets.

"What's all this?" the guard asked when he'd finished.

I looked at the items lined up across the table and cleared my

throat. “Well, that’s for hydration, of course.” I indicated the Evian bottle of holy water. “This is a mineral supplement,” I said of the vial of copper filings. “Supposed to be good for circulation. My notepad’s there. And that…” My eyes shifted to the small bag of rice. “Well, after I finish up here, I’m going to try to make it to a wedding. You know, shower the happy couple when it’s over.” I gave a small eye roll to suggest I thought the practice as silly as they probably did.

Neither guard cracked a grin. For several troubling seconds, their shielded gazes remained fixed on my face. Then, as though coming to some sort of psychic agreement, they gave a simultaneous nod.

“Get your shit and get out of here,” the nearer one grunted.

I obliged and was soon hurrying up the steps, just as thankful to be past the checkpoint as I was to be above ground. On street level, giant skyscrapers funneled powerful winds down Broadway. My coat flapped like wings. Tilting my head back, I spotted the landmark building that housed Arnaud’s offices. He owned the entire tower, as well as several others in the Financial District.

Five minutes later, a pair of young men in brass-button suits were opening the building’s front doors for me. Vampires didn’t mess with wards. They kept blood slaves instead—as much for a food supply as security. I nodded at their ageless faces and stepped from the batting winds.

The deep lobby felt like a tomb. The young woman at the crescent-shaped reception desk smiled a little too earnestly as the doors closed behind me, sealing out the sun and inducing a bone-deep chill.

“Welcome,” she called in a lilting southern accent. “How may I help you?”

“Good afternoon.” I walked up and stood the NYPD card on her marble desk. “I’d like to have a word with Arnaud, if I may.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“For police business?”

“All meetings require an appointment, sir, official or otherwise.”

I knew Arnaud had leverage in this city, but wow. “All right, let’s make one for say … fifteen minutes from now?”

She tilted her head in a show of forbearing. White-blond hair that had been brushed to a sheen fell over the shoulder of a pale scoop-neck blouse. She was beautiful in a way that wasn’t quite right. Too porcelain. I suspected I had only to remove her stylish choker to discover the puckered cause.

“Appointments can only be made by phone,” she said, “and require three to five days for approval.”

“Three to five days?”

I didn’t have three to five days. I had exactly one. I studied the receptionist in thought. It wasn’t hard to imagine the young debutante

she had been, stepping from the Port Authority Bus Terminal, suitcase in hand, dizzying dreams of theater in her head. Fury at Arnaud and his fellow parasites burned in my blood. If I'd had the power to restore that young woman, believe me, I would have.

Though the receptionist continued to show her perfect teeth, her smile seemed less inviting now, more menacing. In my peripheral vision, I noticed several young men I hadn't seen upon entering. They drew nearer, making it so my only move would be toward the door I had entered by.

"I'm sorry, sir," the receptionist said, her voice developing a not-so-subtle edge, "but you're going to have to leave."

She seemed to become taller, the bones of her jaw sharper.

I glanced around, tightening my grip on my cane. The young men, who could have been interns with their shiny side-parted hair and Brooks Brothers suits, drew nearer still. I felt Arnaud's cold eyes watching me from theirs, inducing a weakness in my core. I forced myself to straighten.

I had one more ace.

Splaying my right hand on the desk, I said, "My name is Everson Croft, grandson of Asmus Croft, Grand Mage of the Society of the Dragon. I demand the right to an audience with Arnaud Thorne."

As the powerful words shook from me and resounded around the marble room, the men stopped. The receptionist's eyes fell to my ring finger. The winged serpent embossed in thick silver appeared ready to lunge up at her. Inching back, she lifted a phone to her ear.

I'd thought that might get things rolling.

"Um, there's an Everson Croft to see you, sir." She listened, her large eyes never leaving my ring, but the phone call was for show. Arnaud had seen and heard all that she had.

After a moment, she hung up and shifted her gaze past me. "Show him up," she said, no longer smiling.

Without touching me, the group of men enveloped me and fell into a silent lockstep. I moved with them, as though carried by a cold, hypnotic force. As blood slaves, the men weren't vampires, but vessels for Arnaud. A brood mentality, along with superhuman speed and strength, were just a few of the perks that came with the position. Perhaps a modest stipend.

We boarded an elevator that lifted off with smooth, stomach-dipping speed. The slaves, who probably *had* been finance majors at one time, fixed their gazes straight ahead. In the brushed steel doors, I studied their faces, their dead eyes. I'd heard that vestiges of humanity remained inside them, clawing the walls of their bodily confinement, screaming for release or death. All very much to the head vampire's delight, I imagined.

I looked away, not wanting my compassion toward them to soften my guard. At Arnaud's word, the same poor souls would be clambering over one another to rip out my throat. I was a little surprised they hadn't tried yet.

At the top floor, we exited and proceeded down a hall of what appeared executive-level offices. Ahead loomed a stately set of doors, the wood oiled and dark. Outside the doors, ice-cold hands plied my cane away and stripped off my coat. They lifted away my necklace holding my charmed coin. Though I knew better than to resist, my heart pumped into full panic. All of the defenses I'd been counting on left with the departing men.

The blood slave who remained behind suppressed a smile. His face was youthful but his almond-shaped eyes were beginning to jaundice at the edges, betraying advanced age. His hair spoke to another era, the short black bangs combed straight down, like a monk's. *You can take the boy out of the Middle Ages,* I thought, *but you can't take the Middle Ages out of the boy*.

He bowed and opened one of the two doors.

Every instinct in me was demanding I leave, and yet…

The dim room beyond the doorway released a smell of leather and musk. At the other end of what appeared either a large office or small library, a huge brown-tinted window cut a tall man's silhouette. For a vertiginous moment, the regal figure seemed to take his measure of me.

"Everson Croft," a silken voice said. "Please, do come in."

I was dimly aware of stepping over the threshold and onto soft carpet.

"You are either the most audacious human to request an audience," the voice said, with a hint of tragic humor, "or, my poor boy, you have simply given up on life." I only realized the figure had been standing with his back to me when he wheeled and a pair of predatory eyes flashed into view.

Behind me, the door slammed closed.

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19

I watched Arnaud watching me. He wasn't as tall as he had first appeared. Neither was he wearing the long-tailed black suit I thought I'd glimpsed when he turned. His suit was light colored and contemporary, the pale oxford underneath open to a criss-crossing of thin chains. Mane-length waves of white hair fell from a center part, brushing a silky red scarf that draped his shoulders.

The newspapers called him *fashionable* and *rakish*. I found *vampiric* far more fitting. The black eyes that stared into mine held no humanity—and hadn't for hundreds of years.

"So, which one is it?" he asked.

My voice stuck in my dry throat. "I-I'm sorry?"

"Audacity or lost hope?"

Though Arnaud remained preternaturally still, I could sense a coiling in his muscles, as though he were poising to strike. I felt, too, that he *wanted* me to sense this. I stiffened in apprehension.

"Boldness or gloom? Because, you see, my boy, I have the cure for either."

I searched my peripheral vision for anything I might put between us, but the bookshelf-lined room seemed to have stretched out, the corporate desk and plush leather chairs suddenly far away. I felt naked without my confiscated items.

Arnaud gave a knowing laugh. "Rest assured, Mr. Croft, your accoutrements are quite safe."

Vampires weren't psychic, per se, but they could detect the chemicals humans emitted as a byproduct of fear. They also enjoyed inciting them, the hormonal aerosol being almost as nutritive for a vampire as blood. I could all but feel Arnaud's smooth tongue lapping up mine.

Gross.

"Security precaution, you understand," he was saying. "With so much nastiness and loathing out there, one can never be too prudent. But between us, a bag of rice could hardly be considered harmful, now could it?" When he laughed again it was with a hint of derision. "Or helpful, for that matter. As though spilled grains would drive one to such distraction he would fail to finish what he'd set out to do."

Okay, so I'd gone with an untested myth on that one. Holy water, however—

"But back to the question at hand." Arnaud took his first precise steps toward me, pupils gleaming. "Was it daring or despair that brought you? Or perhaps something of both? I am a granter of wishes, you know."

His velvet voice took on a low flutter of hunger as he crossed the office cleanly, effortlessly. In the next moment, he was too close. An oppressive atmosphere enveloped me. It was the enticing smell I'd picked up outside, but grown more penetrating and foul, as though it were covering up a stink of decomposition. I struggled to breathe, to think clearly.

"Oh, yes, *wonderful* wishes," he purred.

He was at my back now, circling. The atmosphere was the vampire's making, emanating from his pores like a toxic opiate. An intense drowsiness pulled at my mind with the promise of the warmest, most luxurious sleep.

"You are a little older than the boys I like to take in, but I would make an exception." Something walked over my scalp like spider's legs—his fingers, I realized. "Yes, I smell power in your blood, Mr. Croft. Pledge it to me, and I will grant you wealth, eternal life. You'll never want again."

I staggered to remain standing.

"One has only to … *submit*," he whispered, the final word like a down pillow under my head. "There, you see?"

His fingers massaged my scalp in small circles. When a chilling breath brushed my throat, I realized in horror that I was offering it to him. Through thick eyelids, I watched his lips retract from an impossibly large jaw, the emerging fangs bunched together like a great white's. His fingers sank in, bracing my head, while his lower face disappeared beneath my chin.

The Pact, I tried to murmur.

I could feel the skin near my Adam's apple dimpling beneath needle-sharp points.

"The Pact," I managed.

Arnaud hesitated.

"You and the … the Society of the Dragon," I forged on. "You made a pact with one another… to stop warring and join forces … against … the Inquisition."

I had discovered the story during my time in Romania, connecting it to the ring I'd found among Grandpa's possessions. A ring that had been inert for as long as I'd possessed it, but now pulsed around my finger.

Arnaud chuckled softly. "I'm afraid the Brasov Pact does not apply

to descendants. Only to those who had an immediate interest in keeping the Church from lopping our heads from our bodies. Besides, that was more than four centuries ago. I trust there's a statute of limitation."

I'd been struggling my right arm up until my fist was level with his heart.

A strange Word swelled in the back of my throat: *"Balaur!"*

It emerged like a cannon ball, as though the ring had spoken it. An angry force exploded from my right fist, and Arnaud went flying. His body cracked into the far wall of polarized glass, head whiplashing back. But when Arnaud landed, it was on fingertips and the toes of his loafers. He growled at me through shanks of white hair.

"How *dare* you," he seethed, pain twisting the words.

Flaps of skin dangled from his face, as though it had been raked by a dragon's talons. I had to remind myself that the gleaming blood wasn't his. He hissed again as smoke rose from beneath the collar of his shirt.

"You burned me!"

"The ring burned you," I corrected him. I was in full possession of my language and limbs again, the torpor gone from my thoughts. "Punishment for violating the Pact. So, in essence, you burned yourself."

When Arnaud reared to spring, I brought my right fist up. His eyes shifted to the ring, and I watched the first shard of uncertainty take hold. The enchanted ring was no longer pulsing—I may have exhausted its charge with the blast—but Arnaud didn't need to know that.

He sniffed the air for the least apprehension, but I gave him none. "Can we talk now?" I asked with an attitude of impatience.

Arnaud scowled but relaxed and slowly rose. The smoke dissipated into a haze around his head. He straightened his jacket with indignant tugs, then fixed the scarf over his shoulders. When the smoke cleared, his face was intact again, the skin restored to its waxy state.

He paced over to a small bar, his back to me. On the other side of him, glass clinked and liquid splashed. I expected him to order me out, but when he turned, he was holding two poured drinks—scotch on the rocks, from the looks of them. He set one drink down on an end table beside a chair of oxblood leather and took the chair across from it: an invitation to join him.

I did so, going over and lowering myself to the edge of the soft cushion.

Arnaud took a sip of his drink, then gave his hair a toss as he sat back, the rakish billionaire once more. He opened a hand of slender fingers toward me. "*Now*," he said, as though we'd arrived at some

understanding, “if you’ve come to talk, then get on with it. I’m a very busy man.”

Not knowing how long his respect for the ring would hold, I decided to shoot to the point. “There was a murder at St. Martin’s Cathedral,” I said, “sometime Wednesday night.”

“Ah, yes. Father Richard.” He made a soft tsking sound. “A tragedy.”

“Did you know him?”

“Indeed. We had an opportunity to talk last month.”

“Oh?”

“Mr. Croft,” he said with an edge of reproach, “if you insist on carrying on in this manner, with your surprised faces and little ‘oh’s, I am certain I can find a more productive use of my time. You know our history. You know my interest in the church property. Even now you’re searching for an eye tick, some tell, to determine whether I was involved in his murder. Why the artifice? Certainly a man of your bloodline can come straight to it and ask.”

“Did you have him killed?”

As he studied his drink, a smile touched the corners of his thin lips. I had played my hand clumsily, handing him back control, dammit. “There,” he said, “doesn’t that feel better?”

“Well?” I pressed.

“Why the sudden interest? The Church showed far less concern for your forebears, after all. Poisonings. Public burnings. Beheadings.” Arnaud made the tsking sound again. “Nasty, nasty business.”

“Is that why you want St. Martin’s out of the Financial District?”

The Church had come down just as hard, if not harder, on Arnaud and his contemporaries. Had magic users and vampires not aligned, both would have been cleansed from Europe. Instead, they fought back, defeating the regional enforcers of the Inquisition. Arnaud and Grandpa went their separate ways, only to eventually wash up on the same Manhattan shoreline.

I mentioned how Grandpa never joined us at Sunday Mass? He had his reasons.

“In part,” Arnaud replied at last. “But I have learned many things in my life, chief among them to not draw attention to my nature. Our kind inspires fear, yes, but also uncommon wrath.”

Arnaud stood and, his glass dangling from his long fingers, strolled to the floor-to-ceiling window that cast the room in tannic brown light. Beyond and far below, I could see the wall that separated his domain from the rest of Manhattan. The streets beyond were clogged with cars and pedestrians, great knots converging on the checkpoints. For a moment, I saw the people as Arnaud must have—bearers of pikes and torches, castle-stormers.

“I like to keep my activities quiet, you see.” He took another sip of scotch. “The brutal murder of one as exalted as Father Richard is anything but. Not that I regret what happened. If his death presents me with someone more amenable to financial pressure, well … let’s just say I won’t demur.”

“So you had nothing to do with the murder?”

“I believe I’ve answered your question, my boy.”

He spoke with the self-possession of someone with nothing to hide, and I caught myself nodding.

“What about Black Earth?” I asked.

He turned to face me. “What about them?”

Them? I straightened.

“Are they a group?” I blurted before I could stop myself.

Arnaud’s lips stretched into a wicked smile. Damn. He strolled back to his chair, this time sitting with his legs neatly crossed. He draped a wrist over his knee and jiggled his drained glass, making the ice clink.

“It seems I have something you want,” he said.

“Not necessarily. I mean, if you know something about Black Earth that I don’t, then—”

He silenced me with a raised hand. “The cat is already out of its foul little bag, Mr. Croft. Why, there it is now, scampering about, the rascal.” His eyes darted around as though tracking it, then returned to mine. He studied me for a long moment, his gaze dipping once to my hand.

“The ring,” he said.

I curled my fingers protectively. “Huh?”

“Yes. The ring for the information.”

Though he sounded like someone proposing a simple business transaction, I sensed an underlying urgency. He didn’t like the idea of an enchanted item out there that could hurt him. For my part, I didn’t like the idea of *not* having that item. But with less than twenty-four hours to point Detective Vega in the direction of the killer, I needed to know what Black Earth meant.

“A renewed truce?” I counter-offered.

“The ring or nothing.”

I studied the dragon embossed in the face of dark silver. I hadn’t thought the ring was anything more than symbolic. In fact, I’d only brought it to get inside and, once here, to remind Arnaud of the Pact. Fortunately for my immortal soul, the power of the Pact had been bound inside the ring through enchantment. It was a powerful artifact, and one I might need again.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t give this up,” I said.

“Then it appears we’re done.”

Before I could come up with another offer, Arnaud stood and clapped his hands sharply. The blood slave who had ushered me in opened the door.

"Zarko," Arnaud said. "Please show Mr. Croft down and return his belongings." He rotated back to the window as though I had already been escorted out. Knowing further appeals would fall on deaf ears, I stood from my chair, drink untouched, and headed for the door.

I was nearly to the threshold when Arnaud spoke again. "I've become fond of you in our short time together this afternoon, Mr. Croft." The way his voice warped the word *fond* told me he'd become anything but. I turned anyway, alert in anticipation. "As such, I will tell you this. While the Pact may forbid me from coming after you, I cannot be held liable for the actions of my employees. No offense to good Zarko here, but they are rather mindless, after all. There is no telling what they might do if provoked."

"And what *might* provoke them?" I asked, edging from Zarko, whose pale lips had turned up at the corners.

"Remain on your side of the Wall, my boy, and I doubt you'll ever need know."

I clenched my jaw. In exchange for the vaguest acknowledgment that a group called Black Earth *did* exist, possibly even somewhere in the city, I'd relinquished my access to the bulk of downtown Manhattan—where St. Martin's just happened to sit.

"I won't make any promises," I muttered as I crossed the threshold.

"Well, then neither will I," Arnaud answered.

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I left the Financial District on foot, dumping the bag of rice at the first garbage bin I encountered.

As I stepped from the Wall's shadow, I squinted around. I was still recovering from Arnaud's poisonous presence (the dull afternoon light outside his building had nearly blinded me), but part of my splintering headache arose from irritation at myself. That was what risking my life for nothing tended to do.

Well, not nothing, I thought as I tapped north. I felt I could safely cross Arnaud off the list of suspects. He was right. His survival had as much to do with amassing wealth and influence as keeping his vampiric activities on the down low. As badly as he wanted St. Martin's out of his district, he was resigned to doing so through legal action and bribery.

That left Wang Gang and the White Hand. Perhaps Black Earth was the name of an inner circle Caroline hadn't known about? I still thought it was a long shot, given the language of the message, but Chinatown was all I had. One small problem, however—I didn't have an in with the White Hand like I did with Arnaud. No family connections or…

The thought trailed off as an idea took hold.

Fifteen minutes later I was stepping beneath a string of paper lanterns and opening a door to a sharp *tring*.

A familiar pungency met me as I peered around. It had been years since I'd set foot inside Mr. Han's Apothecary (Midge's Medicinals in the West Village was more convenient), but it was much as I remembered. A tight maze work of shelves and small drawers packed with just about anything a spell-caster could want: roots, rare stones, ground bones, dried arachnids, some as large as my hand, seemingly empty bottles with labels like GOOD HOPE and INSANITY.

I could browse in here all day.

"That Mr. Croft?" an accented voice asked.

I turned to the small register in the front of the store to find a late middle-aged man with jet-black hair, a collared shirt buttoned to his narrow throat. Just the fellow I was looking for.

"Mr. Han! Hey, how are you?"

“Oh, you know, just *chilling out*.” That must have been one of the first English phrases he’d learned because it was his answer to every inquiry into his or his family’s well being. I expected him to ask about my long absence, but he shifted immediately to business. “How can help you? Have good, good sale on scorpion today.” He nodded toward a fish bowl squirming with them.

“Oh, no thanks.”

“Boar tail? Sloth wee-wee?”

For a moment I considered the second—it was great for encumbering spells—but I shook my head. “Actually, Mr. Han, I was hoping you could help me with a question.”

“Have question?”

I looked around to ensure the store’s emptiness before stooping toward his small counter. I studied the diminutive man, doubting his connection to the White Hand went any further than having to pay them a business tax. Even so, I would need to proceed with care.

“Does the name Black Earth mean anything to you?”

“Black Earth,” he repeated sharply. He said nothing for several moments. By his blank face, I couldn’t tell if he was even considering the question. But he was checking the name against a mental inventory because when he spoke again, he said, “Mr. Han no carry. Can order. Be here two week.”

He thrust out a pair of fingers.

“No, no,” I said with a chuckle. I’d always liked Mr. Han. “Black Earth isn’t an ingredient. It’s the name of a group, I think.”

Another blank face.

“Maybe one associated with, you know, the *bosses*?” I looked around to suggest greater Chinatown.

“Boss? I only boss,” he said. “Father boss before me, but gone. Son next boss, but lazy.” He made a face of disgust and jerked his head to the right. “Play videogame but no learn business.”

A pale green curtain fluttered over the doorway Mr. Han had indicated. Beyond, I could make out bursts of electronic gunfire.

“Need Black Earth today?” he said, getting back to my question. “Go to North Wood. Central Park.”

Sensing the line of inquiry was only going to elicit more confused answers, I decided to shift to the shrieker case. I pulled out my notepad and flipped to last night’s scribblings. I noticed my pencil was missing from the spiral binding, probably when the checkpoint guards had rifled my pockets.

“Do you know a man named Chin Lau Ping?”

“Chin drive bus.”

Okay, so I had the right person. But because word of his death hadn’t seemed to have hit the streets yet, I was careful to phrase my

next question in present tense. “Does he ever shop here?”

“Chin come many, many time.”

Sounded like another magic dabbler. I was trying to think of an appropriate follow-up question when Mr. Han turned toward the doorway to his living quarters and unleashed an explosion of Chinese. I looked in time to see a shadow recede from the other side of the diaphanous curtain. Mr. Han shook his head and returned his attention to me. “Chin funny man.”

“You mean strange?”

“No, tell funny joke.”

I couldn’t match Mr. Han’s delighted laughter as he related the impossible-to-follow story involving chopsticks and fried bull testicles, but I chuckled at what I guessed to have been the punch line.

“That’s … great,” I said.

Hitting a dead end there as well, I rounded up a few spell items, including a vial of the sloth urine, and paid for them back at the counter. It looked like I was going to have to do my own research at home. Accepting the neat paper bag, I bid the apothecary owner farewell.

“Chill out at Mr. Han anytime!” he called after me.

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Back home, I reclined in my downstairs reading chair and shook open the afternoon edition of the *Scream*. The cheap tabloid focused on crime and vice, hence the need for two daily runs. Indeed, while the big city papers were entering their second decade of declining ad sales and readership, the *Scream* was in boom mode with no signs of slowing.

On the second page, I found what I was looking for:

Gruesome Evisceration In Harlem! Second In Chinatown!

Though the three-column story was long on sensationalism and short on specifics, I picked out a few details. The Hamilton Heights conjurer had been twenty-eight-year-old Fred "Flash" Thomas. He'd worked at a fast-food joint in the neighborhood and was considered something of a prankster.

According to a neighbor, one of his favorite tricks had been to throw his voice to make it sound as though complete strangers were insulting one another. "Started more than his share of fights," the woman was quoted as saying. "Probably what got him killed."

Magic was what got him killed, actually. And with the voice projecting, it sounded as though he'd been dabbling in the art for a while. The article went on to list the city schools he'd attended, a couple of them reformatory, but nothing to help answer the question of *where* he'd picked up the spell.

The coverage of the Chinatown conjurer wasn't much more informative. I'd gotten the man's name and occupation correct, though it seemed little more was known about him.

"Given their ritualistic nature," the article concluded, "the grisly killings are believed to have been perpetrated by the same sick, depraved individual." My eyes wandered to a composite sketch below.

"Of course," I said.

The staring eyes were too wide, the nose too large, and the lips too narrow, but I could imagine the back and forth as the elderly couple from the Hamilton Heights apartments described me to the police

sketch artist. They'd even included the various scrapes and gouges on my face. My healing spell had all but taken care of those, fortunately, but the physical description of the man wanted for questioning was another matter.

"Six-foot to six-two male," I read aloud, "dark brown hair, hazel eyes … last seen running westbound on 142nd Street, near Fredrick Douglass Boulevard, carrying a wooden cane."

Thank God my projection spell had worked last night. Then again, having the jackass duo of Dempsey and Dipinski as alibis was no guarantee of anything.

I thumbed through the rest of the paper. There was no coverage on the St. Martin's murder yet, which suggested the church had paid the *Scream* for their silence—another way the paper raked in revenue. Church officials no doubt wanted to be able to break the news to the parishioners themselves, and more gently.

The other murders in the last twenty-four hours were shootings, which was actually a relief. It meant the shriekers hadn't fed since being loosed. Maybe the Order had sent someone to deal with them.

I set the paper aside and checked my watch. The East Village conjurer remained under my mind-restoring magic, and would for another twelve to twenty-four. The man being my best source of where the spell had come from, I would need to be there when he woke up.

In the meantime, I could focus on the cathedral murder, which meant trying to learn what Black Earth meant.

Tabitha stirred as I passed her, the food plate and milk bowl beside the divan licked clean. I preempted my cat by saying, "Dinner after your tour."

"I've toured twice already, you tyrannical fu—"

"Language," I reminded her. "Anything to report?"

She yawned and flopped onto her other side. "Your admirer was back."

An electric jolt shot through me. "The woman?" I'd checked the outside of the building before entering but hadn't seen any average-looking brunettes watching. At least not in plain view.

"Still can't tell for sure," Tabitha replied.

"What time?"

"One, two o'clock. I don't know."

"Did you pick out any defining features like we talked about?"

"Yeah, two. She was standing across the street, and her feet were together."

On my last visit to the dentist I was told I grind my teeth. Hmm, I wonder why. "Look, if you're not going to try, then neither am I. How does water and Meow Mix sound?"

Tabitha sighed. “She was in a dark coat, hair past her shoulders.”

I tried to align the composite with people I knew and came up empty.

“Next time you see her, come get me.”

“Hard to do when you’re never home.”

“Just…” She had a point. “Look, I have a ton on my plate. More than *you’ll* ever appreciate. All so we can continue to enjoy our present comfortable lifestyle, I should remind you.”

Tabitha acted as though she wasn’t listening.

“I’ll be upstairs. *Working*.”

As I climbed the ladder to my library and lab, my irritation with Tabitha gave over to puzzlement about who was staking out the apartment. I ruled out plainclothes detective, since Tabitha had first seen the woman yesterday, before the killings in which my unflattering likeness was now the chief suspect. That left … who? Someone involved with the church murder? The shrieker conjurings?

The hologram of the city was dim, anyway, which was a relief. I needed it to stay that way. I didn’t think I could handle another summoning tonight.

I got right to work on the church case, poring through several thick tomes for anything that might relate to the message. I was a good hour in when I found something. In a section on spell-craft in ancient Britain, my eyes locked onto the name of a group who practiced a druidic form of magic.

The monks had called themselves *Nigra Terra*. Translation: Black Earth.

I jotted down a page’s worth of notes on the fierce group, then leaned back in my desk chair in thought. There were a few druid cults in the city who dabbled in nature magic. Blessing trees and animals, that sort of thing. Harmless, really.

But I’d heard rumors of a clandestine group whose activities were less well known. They hadn’t been summoning nether creatures—the alarm would have alerted me. Still, they practiced in Central Park which was telling, given the beings that roamed those wilds. The druid group was either more powerful than the resident creatures or aligned with them, somehow.

I nearly tipped backwards in my chair as I remembered what Mr. Han had said that afternoon.

Need Black Earth today? Go to North Wood. Central Park.

Had he been trying to tell me something?

I was considering the question when the flame on my table erupted in a red-purple column. A folded piece of paper shot from the peaking flame, unfolding as it fell, fluttering to the table top. It came to a rest in the table’s center, as neat as if someone had placed it there.

From the Order? A response within twelve hours would be lightning speed for them. I rushed over to the message anyway, hoping for an update on the shrieker situation.

To: Everson Croft

After reviewing your reports on the recent summonings, we hereby order you to cease pursuit of the matter and discontinue all magic use until further notice. This decree goes into immediate effect.

Signed: The Order

I staggered backwards as though I'd been punched in the throat. "*What?*"

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The Order had voiced displeasure with me in the past (the Thelonious issue remained a *really* touchy subject), but they had never taken away my practice of magic. Next to death, it was the harshest decree that could be handed down, reserved for magic users who drifted into the dark arts.

I stopped. *Is that what they think I've done?*

"Relax, Everson," I whispered. "Deep breaths."

I resumed pacing, respiring in through my nose and out through pursed lips. My heart continued to pound high in my chest. I reread the message. Calling me off the case I could understand. I could even see where the directive was meant to keep me safe. Demonic beings were beyond my present abilities, as my battle with the juvenile shrieker had attested.

But "discontinue all magic use until further notice"? What the hell?

Developed beyond a certain point, magic became as integral to a wizard as any vital organ. More so, magic became a lens through which we perceived existence and our place in it. I couldn't imagine my life without it. But the Order was demanding I do just that.

I tried to harness some hope to the final three words: "until further notice." Maybe this was a temporary stay, again for reasons of safety.

But a harsher truth was rearing up in my mind, and it went back to Thelonious. I'd already mentioned that, as an incubus, he belonged to a similar class of being as demons. It was why the threshold at St. Martin's wanted nothing to do with me. I was also beginning to suspect it was the reason for the Order's decision. After all, the spells had to be coming from someone or something with a strong link to the demon world. That didn't necessarily make me a suspect, but in the minds of the Order, it made me susceptible to manipulation or outright possession. As a wizard with an incubus problem, I was a handicap.

My heart settled. That had to be it.

I studied the plum-colored flame. Getting that assurance from the source would have been nice, but the arcane society to which I belonged—though felt more outsider than member—was rigidly hierarchical. A follow-up inquiry would either get me an identically-

worded decree or be ignored altogether. Experience told me the second. I had a mentor I might have been able to tap, but I hadn't seen Chicory in almost a year. Judging by his scattered nature, I wasn't sure he went much higher up the ladder than I did.

Fine, I thought, balling up the Order's message and tossing it into the flame, where it incinerated. *I'll play along.*

In the meantime, there was the matter of my job at the college. To save it, I was going to need to make some serious headway on the cathedral case before I had to report back to Detective Vega sometime tomorrow. The druid cult in Central Park was a possible break, but I needed a motive for the killing. And for that I would need to talk to someone at St. Martin's. I fished in my pockets for the card Father Vick had handed me.

"Hello, Father," I said when he answered. "This is Everson Croft."

"Everson, it's so good to hear you."

"How are you doing?" I asked carefully.

"If I'm being honest, not well." He gave a forlorn laugh. "My faith is strong, but so too was my closeness to Brother Richard."

"I understand." I waited the appropriate beat before continuing. "I hate to ask at a time like this, Father, but could I stop by this evening to talk? I'm still helping out on the case and was hoping you might shed some light on a few questions."

"I'm not sure I can tell you anything more than I've already told your detective."

Right, I thought, *only I don't have access to Detective Vega's case file. She would erupt if she even knew I was talking to you.*

"Well," I hedged, "I'm pursuing a slightly different lead."

"In that case, I'll do whatever I can to assist. However, I'm conducting a special Mass this evening for church officials. Might we meet in the morning?"

I didn't like the idea of sitting on the case for the next fourteen hours, but what could I say?

"Is eight o'clock too early?" I asked.

"That will be fine, Everson. We can talk in the vicarage here at the cathedral."

"One more thing," I said before he could hang up. "Would you mind, um, meeting me at the front door?"

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23

I couldn't sit on the church case that night, it turned out, much less sleep. Following several restless hours of tossing, I dressed, retrieved an antique item from my trunk, and grabbed my cane. Remembering the no-magic decree, I went back for my revolver, tucking it into the front of my pants.

Outside my apartment building, I peered around to make sure no one was watching. There was no one, period. Barely after midnight, and I had the street to myself. This was a very different New York than the one I'd grown up in. I tightened my coat against the cold and headed east.

Several blocks later, I slipped into Washington Square Park, its walkways and lawns also deserted. I ran my gaze along the curving lines of empty benches. Even the vagrants knew better than to sleep out in the open anymore. The sane ones, anyway.

A wet snort jerked my eyes toward a copse of dying sycamores. *Not deserted, after all*, I thought. When the wind picked up, a scent of sewage blew past. A moment later, a large hominid shadow separated from the trunks, ducking low branches. Crap. I looked around to see whether the ghoul belonged to a pack, but it appeared to have come up alone. Even so, avoidance was usually the best tactic.

I was backing away when the breeze changed direction, flapping my coat against my calves. The ghoul paused, raised its lump of a nose, and sniffed wetly. A moment later, a pair of yellow eyes fell toward me.

Wonderful.

The ghoul's jaw yawned as it began shambling toward me. My cane was halfway apart before I remembered the decree. Sighing, I swapped the cane for my revolver. I had become so accustomed to channeling and pushing energy that the gun felt cold and alien in my grip.

I took aim at the ghoul's head and squeezed. A pair of silver slugs slammed it sideways. The ghoul yowled and kicked through a line of benches. Wooden planks and iron flew up around its hulking body. My backward steps became an awkward jog, jostling my aim. My next shot missed entirely.

The ghoul loped into a run, anticipating its midnight snack.

I wasn't going to outrace it. Stopping, I set my legs in a shooter's stance and aimed with both hands. I tried to remember what the instructor at the firing range had taught me, oh, six or seven years ago. One of the ghoul's yellow eyes bobbed in and out of the revolver's sight, growing larger. I squeezed three times. The final crack sprayed fluid and snapped the ghoul's head back. Both hands flew to its right eye as the creature fell to the pavement, howling.

"Go on," I shouted, stomping my foot. "Get out of here!"

The ghoul thrashed up and scrambled off. They were survivalists first, man-eaters second. I waited until its pained cries and smacking footfalls faded east before returning the revolver to my pants.

All right. I let out a tremulous sigh. *Back to business.*

Where the park opened out, I climbed into the dry wading pool and approached the central ring from which water used to fount. Washington Square Arch, no longer lit at night, loomed as a massive silhouette to the north. I knelt at the pool's center, dry leaves crackling beneath me, and wound a small music box. When I released the key, a tinkling melody rose into the night.

I set the box on the ring and whispered, "Effie."

I'd found the music box in an antique shop years before. Curious, I took it to a local diviner. She told me it had belonged to a girl who succumbed to yellow fever in the 1800s and was buried in the city's pauper grave. Her remains now rested among twenty-thousand others, roughly beneath where I was kneeling. Her spirit, however, was as restless as mine.

"That you, Everson?" an innocent voice asked, clear as a bell.

When I turned, the eight-year-old girl was standing behind me, eyes large and inquisitive. Plain brushed hair fell over the shoulders of the gown she'd probably been buried in, light blue with a broad ribbon fastened belt-like above her waist. Her shoes were simple clogs.

"Hi there, Effie."

"You brought me music box," she exclaimed, moving past me to stoop over her former possession.

I smiled sadly. Ghosts weren't souls. They were best described as living echoes, possessing the appearance and personality of the departed, but little in the way of free will. The more malignant ones could drive a person to insanity, true, but Effie's ghost represented the sweet end of the spectrum. My heart broke a little as I watched her attempt to pick up the box.

To distract her, I said, "What did you do today, Effie?"

"I tried making friends with a boy, but 'e wouldn't talk to me." When she turned, her lips were bent in an indignant frown. She was no doubt referring to a human boy without Sight.

“Probably a loser,” I said. “What about the friends you already have?”

“They’re a’right,” she replied. “But Mary’s gettin’ plumb on me nerves with her tales.”

“Ugh. Mary and her tales.” I shook my head. “Hey, uh, speaking of your friends, I have a question I’d like you to ask them.”

“Whut is it?”

“You know St. Martin’s Cathedral downtown, right?” Fortunately, it was old enough to have been standing during Effie’s time in New York. I watched her nod. “Good. I want you to ask your friends if they’ve seen anything unusual around there in the last month or so.”

“Like whut?” she asked.

I was throwing a blind net. Ghosts were drawn to ley energy, and with the intensity around St. Martin’s, I was hoping one or several in Effie’s circle had made their way down there, maybe picked up on something. A shame I hadn’t befriended any of the ghosts at St. Martin’s, but such things took time.

“Just … anything that might have struck them as odd,” I answered.

Effie appeared to think about that before nodding her head. “A’right,” she said. She turned back to her old music box and, in a soft, haunting voice, added words to the tinkling lullaby.

Sweet babe, a golden cradle holds thee
Soft snow-white fleece enfolds thee
In airy bower I'll watch thy sleeping
Where branchy trees in the breeze are sweeping

Ghosts usually required a full day/night cycle to carry out requests, but I was in no hurry to return to my sheet-tangled bed. Ghouls or not, it was a sleepless night. Too many thoughts knocking around my head: at-large shriekers, no-magic decrees, the cathedral murder, the police sketch, the mystery person watching my apartment, my impending hearing at the college. It made the straightforward existence of the undead seem enviable in contrast.

I wound the box for Effie several more times. Sometime after three, her apparition faded along with her solemn notes.

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It was half past eight the next morning by the time I made it through the pedestrian checkpoint. My NYPD card had worked its charm a second time, but even so, I was thirty minutes late.

I hurried south from the Wall, aware I was challenging Arnaud by returning to his district. I pictured the vampire at his top-story window but doubted the drizzly morning offered him much of a view. The head of his building had been hidden by a drift of low clouds since early light, meaning he couldn't see me. When I peeked up again, my face prickled with current.

Damn. Something told me he could.

I dropped my head and cut west to put a few skyscrapers between us. Soon, I was coming up on the steps of St. Martin's. Beyond the tall bronze doors stood Father Vick, the image of patience.

"Forgive me," I said, hustling up to the other side of the threshold and shaking the collection of moisture from my coat. "Should have known to add an extra hour to the commute."

"It's certainly not what it used to be," he said with a smile. "Please, Everson, come in."

The invitation. I peeked past him to make sure no police were inside—or Detective Vega herself—and crossed the threshold. The wave that rippled through me felt thinner than last time. It didn't induce the same queasiness or deprive me of quite as much power. I wondered whether the shocked and grieving atmosphere of the past two days had something to do with that.

"I'm back here," he said.

I followed his shifting cassock through several doors and across an inner courtyard. The cathedral around us was stone silent. It wasn't until we had reached his one-room apartment that he spoke again.

"How have you been, Everson? I was sorry to hear of your grandparents' passing."

He left the door open a crack behind me, allowing a slipstream of fresh air into the monastic space.

"I'm well," I replied. "Busy. Teaching at Midtown College and now consulting for the NYPD." I intentionally left out that I was doing the second to get six months whacked off my probation—all in the hopes

of saving the first. I didn't need to share the wizarding bit, either.

Father Vick moved a pile of prayer books from the seat of a wooden armchair and gestured for me to sit.

"So you're back in the city?" He placed the books on a small desk beneath his lone window and beside what appeared to be a draped handkerchief, then turned his desk chair so he could face me.

I nodded a little uneasily, sensing the question in his raised eyebrows.

"Well, I hope you know you're always welcome back at St. Martin's," he said.

I was pretty sure the threshold would beg to differ, as well as higher-ups in the denomination who hadn't much cared for my published thesis on the *First Saints* manuscript.

"That means a lot," I said. "Thank you."

He studied me for a moment, hand on his cinnamon beard, before breaking into a pleasant chuckle. "I remember when you were in my beginning Sunday school class. You couldn't have been more than five or six. The biblical stories fascinated you, but you never liked to hear about anyone getting hurt." He chuckled again. "At the time, I thought, 'Now here's someone destined for the ministry.' I sense, though, that you help people in other ways?"

"I do my best," I said noncommittally.

His pale blue eyes studied me again until I felt my body wanting to shift.

"Before we get to your questions," he said, "is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

As a shadow exorcist, he could perceive a person's light/dark conflicts—a skill honed through faith and enhanced by the ley energy that coursed up through the cathedral's foundation. By the subtle shift in his tone, I could tell Father Vick had seen something in me. Whether it had to do with my magical bloodline or my darker Thelonious nature, I couldn't say.

"Thank you, Father, but I'm not here for myself."

"Very well," Father Vick said. He set his clasped hands on his lap to signal he was ready to begin.

"Would you mind going over what happened the, uh—" I fumbled for my pocket notebook. "—the night of Father Richard's murder, leading up to the discovery of his body the next morning?"

"Following Wednesday night's Mass, the four of us who live here—the groundskeeper, an acolyte in residence, Father Richard, and myself—we had a late dinner and then retired to our rooms, around ten. Father Richard must have gotten up at some point to go to the sacristy."

"Would that be unusual?" I patted my pockets for something to

write with.

Father Vick handed me a ballpoint pen from his desk. “No, he would often spend time there when he couldn’t sleep. An hour or so organizing the cupboards, polishing the chalices, preparing for the next day’s service.”

“Did everyone know about this?”

“Those of us here, yes. Though maybe not the acolyte. Malachi has only been with us for a couple of months. I don’t know if Father Richard’s habit was ever mentioned in his presence. In any case, nothing was heard that night. The next morning, Cyrus, our groundskeeper, found him…” Father Vick frowned severely as though to prevent tears from forming in his eyes. “Found him on the floor. Just as you probably saw him the other day.”

I gave the moment its solemn due before continuing. “Is the cathedral locked at night?”

Father Vick composed himself, then nodded. “It’s Cyrus’s duty to secure all of the doors and windows, and he’s very regimental about it. Our locks are security grade, reinforced by the power of the church. No one’s ever broken in, and there were no signs anyone had.”

“Was everything locked the next morning, as well?”

“Yes. Cyrus checked.”

I finished writing, then tapped the pen against my chin. That seemed to rule out someone slipping in with the day crowd, hiding until he could take care of the rector, and then stealing back out. But it didn’t rule out lock picking.

“In the last few weeks, did you notice anyone watching the church, staking it out, anything like that?”

“I stay so busy, Everson. I can’t say that I did.”

He seemed to be apologizing for his lapse in vigilance, which sent a fresh wave of guilt through me. Here I was, posing as a police investigator, interrogating my bereaved former youth minister, all so I might keep my day job. Despite what I’d told Father Vick earlier, I *was* here for myself.

“Had the rector received any recent threats?”

“Several from the White Hand in Chinatown. The church’s commitment to human rights had been butting up against their business interests. The police are supposed to be pursuing that angle.”

I nodded. Maybe I’d leave that one to Detective Vega. I still doubted a Chinatown hit man would have left an obscure message in pre-Latin. Why not the White Hand insignia, meant to inspire fear? I decided to go bolder.

“How about threats from less … mundane quarters?”

Father Vick looked at me thoughtfully before gazing out the window. The drizzle had become a steady rain, splashing over the

courtyard's dark-red flagstones.

"Father Richard came from a more conservative tradition," he said after a moment, "one that believed all magic was the work of Satan or one of his horde. Even sacred magic could open one up to evil forces, he insisted. I tried to help him see otherwise, but he was very rigid in his mindset."

I thought of the violence at the crime scene. "Were his views well known?"

"Well, he didn't seem to think the city was doing enough about the 'occult problem,' as he called it." When Father Vick turned from the window to face me again, it was with a look of apology. He sensed my magic. "He had been preparing to meet with city commissioners and police officials. He wanted them to start cracking down on the 'openly-practicing'—another one of his terms."

I doubted this was something Father Vick had shared with the investigators. If the druid cult had gotten wind of the rector's campaign, maybe they had decided to preempt it. "Have you ever heard of a group called Black Earth?" I asked.

Father Vick frowned steeply in thought. "I'm aware that esoteric groups exist in the city, but my work takes me into the lives of individuals. Those who have lapsed beyond doubt into darkness, aligned with the shadows that dwell there. I've never believed the church's role should be castigation, Everson. We should offer sanctuary and, when possible, healing. Like that young boy in my Sunday school class, I don't like to see people hurt."

He hadn't answered my question, but before I could try again, a sharp pain stole my breath away. Father Vick had raised two fingers, and a force was stabbing through me.

I stared back at him. *What in the hell…?*

But he wasn't causing the pain, I realized, not directly.

Thelonious had been caught off guard and was now burrowing into my energy like a giant tick. Father Vick's powers of exorcism were strong, but not strong enough to dislodge a determined incubus. I raised a hand to show him I was okay. The force and pain relented.

I searched for words to paper over the awkward moment, but Father Vick's pale eyes were gazing past me. I turned and jumped a little to discover someone standing just outside the cracked-open door—a young woman in a white robe, from the segment I could see.

"Come in, Malachi," Father Vick said.

Malachi? The door opened wider, and I saw the person was, in fact, a dude. Though he must have been twenty or so, his nervous, narrow face remained in smooth adolescence. His hair had also thrown me, brown hair long enough to have been gathered into a ponytail in back.

"Malachi is our resident acolyte," Father Vick informed me as way

of introduction. “He’s interested in St. Martin’s history and has been going through our vast archives. Some fascinating items in there.”

I stood and shook the boy’s pliant hand. “Everson Croft.”

The young man mumbled something that was barely audible, his smallish eyes flitting around my gaze.

“Did you have something to tell me?” Father Vick asked him.

“Um, the police are here. They want to see you again.”

I knew there was a chance of that happening, but crap.

“Have them wait for me in the nave. We shouldn’t be more than another minute.”

As the door closed behind Malachi, Father Vick gave me an ironic smile. “It looks like your colleagues have more questions.” He shrugged as he stood. “Given the circumstances, who can blame them? By all appearances, the murder was committed by someone inside these old walls.”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Besides no one having any grievances against Brother Richard? Cyrus is too old to have carried out so violent an attack, and Malachi too gentle. There is no malice in either of them.”

Father Vick *did* have that perceptual ability, but I noticed he’d left himself out.

“I have to ask,” I said, already wincing inwardly at what I was about to say. “Did the two of you have any conflicts? I mean, you seem to have been divided on the issue of magic.”

“A fair question,” he replied, holding my gaze. “And yes, we did argue about the matter. But you don’t have to see eye to eye on every issue to be close.” Grief clouded his face. “If you had siblings, you would understand.”

I nodded and lowered my gaze. *Congratulations, Everson, you’ve just leveled up in shittiness.*

Father Vick placed his hands warmly on my shoulders. “It *has* been good to see you, Everson. And I meant what I said. You’re welcome at St. Martin’s anytime. You’re not the exile you seem to believe yourself to be.”

“Good to see you too, Father.”

With a final smile, he stepped past me. “Well, I suppose I need to get to another meeting. And if I read your earlier reaction correctly, you need a back door to depart through.”

“I guess investigators have their own conflicts,” I said sheepishly.

“Say no more. You can leave through the graveyard.” He led me out to the covered walk that ran around the courtyard. I noticed he took care to lock the door behind him. “I’ll have Cyrus let you out.”

I glimpsed something dark and shining in his ear.

“Father, you’re bleeding.” I pointed to my right ear.

He touched his hair-thatched canal, then inspected the blood on the tip of his finger. “Yes, that happens sometimes.” He reached out and washed his finger beneath a string of water falling from the eave of the courtyard. “We are mortals channeling forces far beyond us, after all.”

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I saw what Father Vick meant about Cyrus. The stooped and palsied groundskeeper could hardly heft his ring of keys, much less bring a chalice down on a man's head with enough force to smite him. And I sensed no magic around him.

I followed Cyrus out a back door and along a path beaten in the grass. We were in an older part of the graveyard behind the church. Dark, weathered tombstones rose like crooked teeth. Raised sarcophagi leaned here and there, a particularly mossy one in a solitary corner, beneath a knotted willow. Though the rain had passed, the chill air was stippled with moisture. A good day for a blazing fire.

Cyrus unlocked a door in the iron gate that ran along Washington Street. I thanked him and stepped through the curtain of energy that protected the sanctuary. Definitely weaker, I noted.

My plan was to get home and prepare some spells for a trip to Central Park that night. Yeah, yeah, magic *verboten*. But I'd already worked it out—I was going to play the dumb card: *Ohhh, I thought you meant no magic in relation to the shrieker case.* Cue smacking of forehead.

Would the Order buy it? Who knew, but this was bigger than saving my job. I was thinking about Father Vick now, a man whose paternal concern was still palpable twenty years later. And the way he'd looked when I made him talk about the rector's death and even suggested he might have had a motive in his slaying?

So yeah, screw the Order. I'd deal with the fallout later. The more immediate challenge was going to be putting Detective Vega off for another day. At least until I could—

"Croft!"

—point her in the right direction.

I wheeled to find the one-woman Homicide squad striding up behind me, a black umbrella glistening above her stretched-back hair. She was wearing the same style of suit she seemed to favor, black jacket and pants, blouse opened at the neck. It was a good look for her, and if it ain't broke…

"What in the hell are you doing here?" she demanded.

“Besides enjoying the weather?”

“Were you just inside the church?” When she arrived in front of me, the challenge in her dark eyes told me she already knew the answer.

“Well, I wasn’t not in the church, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I don’t have time for this, Croft. Yes or no.”

“*Si*.”

“You have no business being in there.”

“Look,” I said, holding up my hands in a no-harm, no-foul gesture, “my grandmother and I attended St. Martin’s when I was growing up. Father Vick was my youth minister. Thursday was the first time I’d seen him in almost twenty years. He invited me to come back and visit him.” All technically true. “I had some time this morning, so…”

“Father Victor is a suspect in a homicide investigation—one you’re consulting on, I should remind you. You’re not to fraternize with him until we’ve wrapped up. I thought I made that clear.”

I was starting to get a little sick of being told what I could and couldn’t do.

“Oh, c’mon, it’s not like—”

“I’m dead serious, Croft.”

“You don’t honestly believe Father Vick had anything to do with the murder. Or are you just aiming for ‘good enough’ again?”

When her eyes glowered, I realized I’d gone too far. “For your information,” she hissed, drawing up until her umbrella was dripping water in front of my face, “his trace evidence is all over the crime scene.”

“Yeah, and maybe that’s because he lives and works there.”

“So you’re an investigator now?”

“Just…” I took a deep breath and let it out. “Father Vick is a good man. He helps people. Just make sure you talk to those who know him before jumping to any conclusions.” I wasn’t sure whether I was trying to convince Detective Vega or myself. After all these years, how well did *I* really know him?

“The message,” Vega said abruptly. “It’s been two days. What do you have?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I was actually going to call you about that. I’m going to, ah, need another day.”

“That wasn’t the deal.”

“Right, but I put out a professional inquiry. I’m expecting an answer tonight.”

Vega looked at me a long moment, sharp suspicion in her stare, then sighed through her nose. “Tomorrow morning, but that’s it. No more extensions or the deal’s off. We clear?”

I shifted my cane to my left hand and offered to shake on it.

But Vega's gaze remained on my cane, the suspicion back in her eyes. "Ever been to Hamilton Heights, Croft?"

"I try not to."

"Where were you two nights ago?"

Other than running down a street, being shot at by you? "Home, slogging through student papers. In fact, I received a visit from a couple of your associates. Dempsey and Dipinski?"

She studied my eyes.

"Know them?" I asked.

After another moment, she gave a reluctant nod. "They liked your cat."

I laughed. "I'm pretty sure the feeling wasn't mutual."

Vega's lips pulled to one side, but only slightly. I bet she had a killer smile. "Watch yourself, Croft," she said as she turned to leave. "I'd hate to have to arrest you again."

That makes two of us, I thought as I watched her pace back toward the cathedral.

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I caught a bus up Broadway, disembarking at the heart of Greenwich Village.

The plan, of course, was to return to my apartment, light a fire, and spend the day indoors, cooking spells. All of that lay west. And yet I felt an urgent pull toward the garbagy, graffiti-bruised East Village and the amateur conjurer who would be rising and shining about now.

"Better think about this, Everson," I muttered, leaning against the cornice of a building on West Third. I might get away with playing dumb on the magic ban, I thought as I observed the funeral flow of foot and car traffic, but the "cease pursuit of the matter" part had been pretty plain.

Still, I'd received no assurance the Order intended to do anything about the "matter" other than call me off it. More likely, whatever they were planning would grow moss before it made it out of committee, by which time our sole lead to the spell supplier could be long gone.

Anyway, the Order didn't have eyes on me twenty-four seven. The perks of being a bottom-runger. Their wards would pick up any magic I cast, sure. So I wouldn't cast any magic. Problem solved.

But there was still that whole violation-of-decree thing.

I peered down Third Street, into a wind stinking of trash and diesel. Then I looked west, toward home.

"Oh, fuck it," I said, and began kicking my way east.

SOME NEIGHBORHOODS LOOKED LESS MENACING in the light of day. The East Village wasn't one of them. Not only were the blackened buildings and trash piles more vivid, but locals were now on the roam, most of them burned out and trashed, too. Beginning at Avenue A, I passed men and women in tatters, yellow skin stretched taut over sharp facial bones, teeth rotten to their roots. A woman with flaking patches of scalp beseeched me for money in a voice that was hardly

human. The rest stared from vacant eyes, tagging them as junkies, the soul-eaten, or both.

I chanted to reinforce the strength of my coin pendant.

At Avenue C, I spotted a familiar mountain of garbage and, across the street, the conjurer's apartment building—one of two on the block still standing. Entering the lobby, I hit the stairwell at a jog.

On the top floor, at the end of the hallway, I readied my cane and threw open the conjurer's door.

The room was empty. Against the far wall, the cheap furniture had been piled up, as though someone meant to collect it later, but the line of laundry and spill of canned goods—the signs of habitation—were gone. My one hope was that the conjurer had been robbed while he slept, but he wasn't in his bedroom. Only the spring metal frame and a scatter of books remained.

Balls.

I checked the other rooms to confirm his absence. The table in his makeshift laboratory remained, as well as the mirror, which lay shattered on the floor, but the spell items were missing, probably packed into his trunk and hauled away. I returned to the main room and paced the newspaper-strewn floor in thought.

Had the conjurer left of his own initiative, or been taken? If the second, there was a good chance the mysterious spell supplier had been involved. Finding the conjurer could mean finding the supplier. There were ways to track the conjurer, but they all involved magic, dammit.

At that thought, a low humming shook through the floor and into my shoes. The sensation was followed by the muted cry of guitars.

Maybe someone had witnessed his departure.

IT TOOK a minute for the guitars to die down and shouted voices to decide someone was knocking at the door. The generator idled down next until I could hear a series of bolts being worked. When the door cracked open, a shotgun barrel appeared beneath a squinting eye. The eye widened in surprise.

"Mr. Wednesday Night!" Tattoo Face exclaimed. The door opened until his giant frame was standing over me. "We were wondering if you'd come back!" He leaned his pump-action shotgun against the doorframe and clapped my shoulder with enough enthusiasm to send me into a sideways stagger. "Got another gig tonight, and everyone wants you there."

I braced myself against the wall. "Really?"

"Talk about a show stealer," Blade said, coming up beside him, a

rail in comparison. She looked me up and down, her neon-pink smirk reminding me what she'd said the other morning about a strip tease.

Thanks, Thelonious.

"Much as I'd, ah, love to come," I stammered, my face warming like a furnace, "I've got a load of work. I was actually stopping by to ask if you knew anything about your upstairs neighbor."

"What about him?" Tattoo Face said.

"Well, it looks like he cleared out. Probably in the last day or so. Know where he might've gone?"

Blade shrugged. "People come and go all the time. Sort of the character of the neighborhood."

"Did he have any recent visitors?'

Tattoo Face worked his lips in thought. "None that I know of."

"Guy with stringy hair and thick glasses?" someone asked.

Blade and Tattoo Face parted so that I could see the young black man with green hair and skin-tight leathers. He was sitting on a couch, fiddling with the tuning knobs on a battered electric guitar, fingers buried in a spray of wires.

"Yeah, yeah, that's the guy," I said.

"Bumped into him on my way in this morning. He was hauling a trunk out into the street."

"Was he alone?"

"Far as I could tell."

"Did you see which way he was headed?"

"Not really." Green Hair remained fixated on his tuning project. "Screamed when he saw me. Something about the End Times. Then he dragged his trunk to the other side of the street and stared till I'd gone inside. Dude was on something. 'Course, so are most the freaks around here."

So the conjurer had left solo.

"All right, guys," I said. "Thanks."

"Sure we can't talk you into making a cameo tonight?" Tattoo Face clasped his meaty hands to his chest in a fervent plea.

Blade smirked again. "We can probably arrange to have a dancing pole brought up."

"In that case…" I said. "Not a chance in hell."

I DULY WEIGHED the stupidity of what I was about to do before returning to the conjurer's apartment. Hair made a good target item, and I found several strands in the conjurer's former bedroom. I placed them in the center of a circle of copper filings. Feather of homing pigeon or, better yet, tusk of narwhale made great catalysts, but I was

fresh out.

Yeah. I was planning to cast a hunting spell right under the Order's nose.

I took a breath before aiming the tip of my cane toward the tangle of hair. The incantation was basic. White light swelled from the cane, absorbing essence from the smoldering hair. A few minutes later, after the hair had popped into foul-smelling flames, it was done. I'd get a direction by the time I reached the street.

If an agent of the Order didn't swoop down on me before then.

As I was about to leave the bedroom, a book among the scattered pile of them caught my eye. I lifted the Bible by its pebbly black spine and flopped it open to its back page. Sure enough, stamped in the top left corner in black ink:

St. Martin's Cathedral: New York, NY 10006

Now that was interesting…

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I hustled down the stairs, already putting my discovery in perspective. St. Martin's was involved in various outreach programs for the homeless; the conjurer had likely picked up the Bible at a shelter or soup kitchen. Or maybe a parishioner had seen him on the street and handed it to him.

But call it wizard's intuition, something about the finding nagged me.

I filed the discovery away as my shoes hit the sidewalk and the hunting spell tugged my cane south. I assumed the conjurer hadn't gotten far, given the loaded trunk he was lugging. But blocks later, where the East Village became the Lower East Side, I began to wonder.

My cane pulled me into the shadow of the Williamsburg Bridge. I suddenly found myself dodging through a shantytown that spread from the bridge's massive concrete pylons onto the sidewalk and half the street. Soot-faced residents watched from sagging boxes and tents made from sheets of industrial plastic. The intelligence in their eyes scared the hell out of me. These were the ones who had held jobs and leases but now lacked the means to even leave the city. The ones the Crash had absolutely plowed under.

As I cleared the underpass, I barely avoided bowling over a man who might have been my high school principal. There was no time to check. At an abandoned police precinct, the spell jerked me hard west. I was practically running to keep up now. The conjurer was close.

I saw the trunk first, dirty blue with aluminum binding, then the back of the stringy-haired man dragging it. He was almost two blocks ahead of me and looked to be heading for Roosevelt Park.

"Hey!" I shouted, breaking into a sprint.

He turned his head enough for me to catch the edge of a thick lens, but he didn't slow. The light changed at the next intersection, and I pulled up, craning my neck to keep him in view through the traffic. The surrounding businesses told me I was where Chinatown was growing into the Lower East Side.

"C'mon, dammit," I whispered, looking for a break in the cars.

I was too focused on the conjurer to pay much attention to the

group of teenagers stepping from a corner store. They were dressed in loose white suits, wife beaters for shirts, their ink black hair slick with something.

"It's him," I heard one of them whisper. "That's the man."

Shoes scuffed. I wheeled in time to see a collapse of bodies. *What the…?* An incoming fist opened my lower lip. A second blow rammed my temple, icing half my face. The sidewalk slammed into me next. I got my forearms up as stomps joined the descending fists.

The young men, who remained savagely silent, were enforcers for the White Hand. The suits told me that much. But what in the hell had I done to them? When the toe of a shoe nicked the family jewels, I decided I didn't care.

"*Vigore!*" I thundered.

The explosion from my cane threw the attackers in all directions. I gained my feet and rotated, sword and staff in hands. A thug who had eaten a light pole crawled in a crippled circle, blood from his face stippling the sidewalk. But the other four jumped up quickly.

"Stay back," I warned, summoning a light shield.

Pedestrians gave us a wide berth, eyes averted. As a general rule, the less you saw on the streets, the better. It was why I hadn't taken a lot of pains to hide my cane after the police sketch went public. *Is that what this is about?* I wondered now. I hadn't seen anything in the paper about a money reward.

Beretta pistols appeared from waistbands. With subtle jerks of their heads, the thugs tried to encircle me. Naturally, I'd left my own gun at home. The black bores of their weapons eyed my face. Whatever their motive, the thugs had left the street at my back open. Hearing the traffic slow and then idle for a red light, I snorted.

Amateurs.

I was two steps into my retreat when a head blow reduced my world to a ringing fog. I plummeted like a bag of bottles into someone's arms, which hefted me through the side door of a van.

The enforcers had transport, evidently, and a driver I hadn't seen.

I landed on the floor of the van. The thugs piled in after me. A foot forced my face against the gritty metal while sharp knees pinned the length of my body. Not that I had any fight left. I was in Woozyville. As the side door rammed closed and the van jounced from the curb, I found my thoughts fluttering around the conjurer—the key to the demonic summonings—as he drifted farther and farther away.

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I didn't lose consciousness but would have preferred it to the jackhammering in my head. Whoever was driving the van wasn't helping. He made several nauseating turns and hard brakes before rearing to a final stop.

The thugs lifted me under the arms and dragged me through a dark garage. In an adjoining basement room, they stripped my jacket and dropped me into a scary-looking chair. A thick leather strap went over my lap and one apiece around my chest and throat, the last cinching until I could hardly swallow.

Instead of struggling, I fumbled for my casting prism. It wasn't there. Brain too bruised.

My wrists and ankles received similar restraining treatment as my torso, the fingers of both hands forced into a pair of metal contraptions attached to the armrests. That couldn't be good. A muscled thug—the driver, I guessed—twisted a series of knobs until my finger joints were pressed straight. His next twists brought them to the verge of bending backwards. Something told me he'd done this before.

"Hey," I mumbled as the first throbs started up, "think you could back off a hair?"

The driver lumbered to a shadowy wall to my right.

Guess not.

I eyed my splayed hands, wondering how long I'd be able to hold out. I'd never been tortured before and didn't think I was going to be very good at it. But *who* was torturing me, exactly—and why?

"Chin Lau Ping."

I squinted at where the voice had come from. Its strained quality sounded like that of a girl on the verge of a tantrum. But the figure looming from the shadows ahead of me was too hulking to be a girl.

"Chin Lau Ping," the high voice repeated. "Why?"

Thick gold rings entered the light first—hands holding the lapels of a velvet smoking jacket. Underneath, a white silk shirt swelled over a loose paunch and the beginnings of man breasts. The emerging head was basketball round, anchored by a double chin and capped with an adolescent spike cut. As the man squinted at me, I wondered if he

knew how stupid he looked.

But wait, what was he asking?

"*Chin Lau Ping*," he screeched.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. "And is the screaming really necess—"

"Mr. Ping was my courier, and you murdered him. Why?"

Courier…? Murdered…? Then it clicked. Chin Lau Ping was the Chinatown conjurer. And this man asking after him was his boss: Wang "Bashi" Gang, head of the Chinatown crime syndicate.

I'd found an in with the White Hand after all, but not the one I probably wanted.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I tried to raise a hand before remembering they were both bolted down. "I didn't murder anyone, least of all your courier. There's been a misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?"

I really wished he'd stopped screeching. It was hell on my concussion. But at the moment, I was more concerned with the glossy black-and-white photo he was shoving in front of me.

"These were taken by the security camera at Hunan's Restaurant."

The photo was actually a split shot, the first showing me about to enter the alley beside Chin's apartment, the second, me leaving at a run—both with date/time stamps. If you looked hard enough, you could just make out the blob-like shadow of the golem in pursuit, but I didn't think that would impress Bashi.

Two of his thugs stepped from the wall, holding up my coat and cane as though presenting evidence in a court of law. I had to admit, the artifacts looked a lot like those in the photos.

I decided there was no point in lying about being there.

"Yeah, that's me." I gave an embarrassed laugh. "I'd knocked off a couple beers earlier. When nature called and I spotted the Dumpster in the alley… Look, it's not my proudest moment."

"Start with the pinky," Bashi said.

The driver stepped forward and twisted a knob over my right hand. My fifth-digit blossomed with fresh pain.

"Wait! You didn't let me get to the part where I was planning to clean it up."

"The day after Chin's murder, you went to Mr. Han's Apothecary and asked if he knew him."

My mind raced. He was right. I had done that. But had Mr. Han informed on me? Though the owner could be hard to read, I got that he genuinely liked me. No, there had to be another explanation.

Then I remembered the shadow beyond the doorway to his living quarters. Mr. Han hadn't been the informer, but his no-good son. He was also an enforcer for the White Hand and probably the thug who

had spotted me on the street.

I hoped he was the one I'd rammed face-first into a light pole.

"Right, right," I said, as though remembering. "I'd heard about the murder and was just asking—"

"*That was before it was in the paper,*" Bashi screeched over me.

Right again.

The driver gave the knob a final hard twist. For an instant my pinky felt like the cord beneath a tight-rope walker at its midpoint. And then the finger snapped. A marrow-deep pain speared my senses. I thought I was going to pass out. Instead, I made a sound like nothing that had ever come out of my mouth: part grunt, part shout, part plea —all in the same breath.

"Should we take care of your ring finger next?" Bashi asked, a small smile pursing his lips. My agony was having a cheering effect on him, apparently. Maladjusted much?

"No, no," I panted, sweat breaking over my body. "Give me a minute."

His lips straightened. "Did the Morettis hire you? The Brusilovs?"

He was popping off major names in the city's Italian and Russian crime families—White Hand's competition. I remembered what Caroline had said about Bashi's bloody campaign of revenge. That I had murdered Chin was already established in his mind. He wanted my patron. Problem was, claiming to have no patron would get me my remaining fingers broken, additional tortures I didn't want to think about, and a bullet in my concussed head. A false confession would probably only get me the bullet. Either option sucked.

That left the truth. "I don't work for anyone."

Bashi nodded at the driver, who began twisting the fourth knob.

"I'm a wizard," I shouted, forcing the words out as quickly as I could. "I save amateur conjurers from their spells. Chin was preparing a summoning. My alarm picked it up, but I reached his apartment too late. The demonic creature had already arrived. It cleaned out his organs—it's how they gain strength—and it escaped. That's why Chin's window was blown out."

I'd squeezed my eyes closed as I babbled and was afraid now to open them. Some New Yorkers accepted magic and supernatural creatures with a shrug. Others decried such notions as batshit insane. I didn't know where on that spectrum Bashi's belief system fell, but the still-mounting pressure against my ring finger wasn't a good sign. "There was another summoning in Hamilton Heights," I added through gritted teeth. "Same night, same result."

My center joint was verging on failure when the squeaking knob went silent.

"Where did Chin get the spell?" Bashi asked.

I exhaled an unspoken *thank God* and opened my eyes to find Bashi showing a staying hand to the driver. One more twist and my finger would have joined its neighbor in the very-crooked club.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," I said. "When I visited Mr. Han, it was to see if he knew anything about Chin's casting background. He didn't, but I'm on the trail of someone who was given the same spell."

"Who?"

I let out a forlorn laugh. "Good question. The man was two blocks away when your boy band jumped me."

Bashi narrowed his eyes. I was sure the "boy band" remark had doomed me, damned pain endorphins. Bashi gestured to the driver, who began working the knobs again. But he was twisting them the other direction. The pressure across my joints eased until I could draw my fingers free. My right pinky was already halfway to ballpark frank proportions, but I flexed and extended the others.

"When you find out who's behind the spells," Bashi said, "you will report back to me."

I stared at him in confusion before understanding took hold. In his megalomania, Bashi believed the spell to have been a personal attack on his sovereignty. I was careful not to disabuse him of the notion. "You have my word," I said solemnly.

His thugs began removing the belts.

"And you have until tomorrow," Bashi replied.

"Wait, tomorrow?"

He flicked a card with a phone number onto my lap, then turned and disappeared through a doorway.

Another deadline. Super.

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A letter from Midtown College stood among a clutch of bills in my mailbox when I returned to my apartment building later that afternoon. I tore the envelope open with my teeth and shook open the folded letter. It was a formal notice from the board for Monday morning's hearing, eleven a.m.

Well, good for Snodgrass.

I stuffed it into a jacket pocket, too exhausted and hurt to care, and made the four-story climb to my unit.

After Bashi's men had thrown me back onto the same street corner they'd abducted me from, I had tried to pick up the conjurer's trail. No dice. The hunting spell was spent, and I lacked the focus to return to the conjurer's cleared-out apartment to create a new one. Instead, I wandered Roosevelt Park and the Bowery, squinting around and mumbling inquiries at the few people who would let me approach. No one had seen a bedraggled man lugging a trunk.

I'd lost him.

I closed and locked my apartment door, then leaned against it to get my mental bearings. In my still-concussed state, the shrieker and cathedral murder cases were starting to blur badly—and the next twenty-four hours were going to be crucial to both. I needed to concentra…

I came to in a sitting position. The loft was dark. Between my splayed-out legs, a pair of luminous green eyes stared back at me. "I thought you were dead," Tabitha said. Though she spoke with indifference, I picked up an undercurrent of concern. Whether for my wellbeing or her own, I couldn't tell.

"How long was I out?" I tried to make out the hands on my watch face.

"A few hours."

"Hours?"

I gained my feet delicately, a force pounding from my brow to the back of my head. When the room steadied, I flipped the switch for the flood lights. My purpling pinky finger looked and felt like a string had been knotted around its base and left on for several days. I hung my coat on the rack, gathered the spilled mail, and shuffled toward the

kitchen. Tabitha followed on my heels.

"You all right, darling?"

I couldn't remember the last time Tabitha had asked after my health. I must have looked like hell.

"Nothing a little magic can't fix." I poured myself a glass of water and chugged it. I hadn't had anything to drink since that morning. Or eat, I realized. "But first, let me get some dinner going."

Tabitha made a sound of annoyance as she leapt onto the counter. "You're more likely to pan sear your hand. Just get everything out of the fridge and then go take care of yourself. I'll handle dinner."

I blinked. "You're going to cook?"

It was less that Tabitha had non-grasping paws than she was offering to do, well, anything. Her slitted look told me to back off. Shrugging, I pulled out a couple of New York strips, shredded onion, and some sides. I started to season the pan, but Tabitha swatted my hand and shooed me out.

I would have given anything to stay and watch, but my cat was right. I needed to put myself back together. I started in the bathroom with my pinky finger. Holding a snapped-in-half Emory board to its underside, I straightened my finger, then secured it to the splint with a yard of sports tape.

The next step was to reconstitute my prism. As sizzling sounded from the kitchen, I leaned against the sink and repeated a centering mantra. It took a good fifteen minutes for the prism to emerge from the pink fog and become something solid. The nap must have helped.

With the prism restored, I touched the cane to the back of my head and my pinky, uttering healing incantations. Energy coursed into both, taming the throbbing, knitting bone and tissue back together. It would take time, but I already felt better, clearer.

Good, because I had work to do.

AFTER A DINNER THAT WAS—I had to hand it to Tabitha—pretty stellar, I climbed the ladder to my library and lab.

The hologram in the corner was dim, which disturbed me. I'd already decided that whoever had supplied the conjurers the shrieker spell was up to something big. What, exactly, I didn't know. But for him or her to stop now?

No, I didn't like it at all.

Best case, the Order had addressed the matter. But apart from disciplining their own, the Order almost never acted with that kind of speed. Even if they had, they wouldn't necessarily tell me. Which left me on the hook with Bashi. No matter how I squinted at the situation,

I was going to have to track down the East Village conjurer and find out who supplied the spell.

Right now, though, the cathedral case was the more pressing. There was my job at the college, sure, and needing to get the promised info to Detective Vega by tomorrow. But there was also Father Vick. The more I thought about what Vega had told me outside the cathedral, the more certain I became that the investigative noose was drawing around his neck. If I didn't deliver a more compelling suspect, Father Vick was going to get strung up for something he hadn't done. And given the nature of the crime, capital punishment was *not* out of the question.

My best lead—all right, my *only* lead—was the druid cult in Central Park, who might or might not call themselves Black Earth and might or might not have any connection to Father Richard's murder.

Slam dunk, right?

I set a portable range on my table and placed a cast-iron pot onto each of the two burners. I split a bottle of green absinthe between the pots and set the burners to medium. Given the kinds of horrors that lurked in the Park—and that the druid group was an unknown quantity—my objective was to get in and out unnoticed and to keep anyone or anything who tried to kill me from doing so.

That meant potions.

I didn't have time to prepare the more elaborate ones I'd been planning, but I had a couple of quick and ready recipes to fall back on. Into the left pot I scattered brown clumps of rabbit's hair, a heaping spoonful of baking soda, and about half that of chameleon scales. With a wooden spoon engraved with casting symbols, I stirred the ingredients of the stealth potion.

"Furtiva," I chanted, directing energy through the spoon.

The steaming liquid bubbled and thickened to a gray sludge. Satisfied the mixture was on its way to becoming the potion I wanted, I twisted the burner's knob to low. In an hour or so, it would thin to a liquid I'd be able to drink.

One down, one to go.

I turned to the other steaming pot and took a focusing breath. This would be for self defense, and with a just-purchased vial of sloth urine on hand, I decided to go with an encumbering spell. I uncapped the vial and tipped it over the pot. To the absinthe and foul-smelling urine, I added a nugget of tungsten, a large syringe-full of condensed fog, and some Plaster of Paris. Following healthy doses of energy and intention, the mixture began to sludge and bubble, casting up a rancid odor.

"Christ," I muttered against my sleeve. At least I wouldn't have to drink that one. Woe to the unlucky bastard I squirted it at, though.

With my potions simmering, and an hour to kill, I climbed down from the lab and retrieved the music box and my revolver. It was a longish shot, but maybe Effie would have something for me by now.

WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK drifted with the chill mist of recently-fallen rain. I checked to make sure no ghouls were lurking before climbing into the drained wading pool and winding the music box.

"That you, Everson?"

"Hey, there." I twisted to face the entity who would always remain the phantasmal likeness of an eight-year-old girl. Effie's eyes widened as they moved past me.

"You brought me music box," she cried, running toward it.

It was that whole echo thing. Unless redirected, ghosts tended to repeat themselves from one encounter to the next, and often several times within the same meeting, like video loops or skipping records.

"Hey, did you get a chance to talk to your friends?"

" 'Bout whut?" she asked, focused on the box she couldn't quite handle.

"About whether they'd been down to St. Martin's in the last few weeks and seen anything unusual."

"Oh, thas right." She gave up on the box and started skipping in a circle, her shifting dress and clogs eerily silent over the damp leaves. "Jus' Mary, but you can't believe a word she tells ya."

I frowned. Just what I needed, an unreliable witness.

"What kind of manure is she unloading this time?" I asked.

"Says she was there a fortnight ago, playing hide an' seek with a feller at night."

"Oh yeah?"

"Man with a funny robe and hood. Says 'e was in the graveyard, but 'e wouldn't come from hiding, even when she found him."

"Did Mary say *where* he was hiding?"

"Behind a crypt 'neath a scary tree."

I perked up like an antenna. She was talking about the mossy tomb I'd walked past that morning, in the old part of the graveyard. A fortnight would have been about ten days before the murder. Had the robed man been staking out the cathedral? Plotting his crime?

"Did Mary notice anything else?" I asked.

"Jus' that 'e was easy to find on 'count of his mumbling."

Mumbling? "Could she make out any of the words?"

Either Effie's ghost was tired of the questions or didn't think anything from Mary's mouth was worth exploring, because she didn't answer. She stopped at her music box, and when she began to sing

again, it was as though I was no longer there. I made a few attempts to bring her back to Mary's story, but the ghost was too absorbed in her solemn lullaby.

I sat back in thought. Some druids were known to wear hooded robes. Not much of a lead, I admitted, but neither did the ghost's account rule them out. I checked my watch. The potions would be about ready.

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It was one a.m. by the time I reached Central Park. From the relative safety of West 110th Street, the North Woods looked perfectly forbidding. As my chatty cabbie had been all too enthused to point out (I suspected amphetamine use), the area had become known as "The Bone Yard" because of the gnawed human remains that turned up from time to time.

"So unless you're trying to lose a whole lotta weight, guy, I'd steer clear." His laughter had gone off like machine-gun fire in my face.

Hilarious.

I eyed the dense growth as the cab motored away, finding it hard to believe anyone would choose to venture in there, much less call it home—even a powerful cult of druids. But the bits of info I'd assembled pointed to just that.

"It's just never easy," I muttered, pulling a water bottle from inside my jacket and untwisting the cap. The stealth potion coated my throat as I gagged it down, the aftertaste like something you'd drain from an old car engine.

But as I ducked into the trees, the potion began to work its magic. A tingling force grew over me like a wool glove. An inspection of my body showed that I was blending into the surroundings. My footfalls softened until they made no sound. Though I didn't have an animal's sense of smell, I knew my odor was being suppressed as well.

After cresting a hill, I eased my way down a rocky ravine, where I could hear water flowing. The hidden moon diffused enough pale light through the low cloud ceiling to see by. When I encountered a family of cropping deer, I weaved through them as a test. None of them even raised a head.

"Yes!" I whispered, causing the deer to bolt.

Like much of magic, potion-making was unpredictable. A recipe followed the same way ten times could yield ten varying results, depending on the skill of the magic user. My consistency was improving, but it was nowhere close to Elder-level magic. And even though I'd nailed the stealth potion this time, it had its limits. Time, for one. It would probably hold up thirty minutes before petering out.

Meaning I had to hoof it.

At the bottom of the ravine, I rock-hopped a stream and came upon an old path winding alongside the waterway. That I'd found the path at all told me it was still in use. By what, I couldn't tell. Whether it was a trick of shadow, one set of prints looked awfully trollish.

I followed the path, hoping druids used it, too.

Druids weren't wizards, but they were wizard-like. They drew energy from nature essences, ancestral worship, and, in some cases, ancient gods. They were also big into consulting stars for omens. But that was all generalization. Like any class, druids came in different flavors—and if the group I was seeking *had* bludgeoned the rector, then I was dealing with one of the more homicidal variety. *Nigra Terra* of Roman times was supposed to have engaged in human sacrifice, even using human skin as parchment for its sacred texts. If we were talking about a descendant group, I hoped they'd at least updated to bond paper.

The path passed beneath a crumbling stone archway, fallen stones piled to one side, before seeming to end in a small clearing of boulders. The trees bordering the clearing looked impassable. I expended precious potion time searching the area but found no signs of anything. I was preparing to return down the path when it occurred to me to check for a veiling spell.

"Svelare," I said, sweeping my glowing cane in a slow circle.

One by one, boulders loomed from the darkness and receded into shadow. I had almost completed the circle, when a boulder set back behind some others seemed to ripple.

Hmm?

I was moving toward it when a whisper rose on the wind.

"We see you, fiend."

My heart beat into my throat as I killed the light. I looked around but could make out no one and nothing. Just the shadows of boulders. A chill energy swirled through the clearing. Druid magic? As I returned my gaze to the rippling boulder, it straightened into the silhouette of a hooded, scarlet-robed figure.

I separated my cane into sword and staff. "Who are you?" I demanded.

"We are death to your kind," the figure whispered.

The death part was troubling enough, but *we*? I ventured a peek around.

Okay. I was surrounded by robed figures. I must have triggered a spell planted on the trail. Veiled, the druids had waited for me to walk into their midst. Like a dummy, I'd obliged—and lit my staff. With the druids' attention now focused on me, I could feel the magic I'd pushed into my potion thinning. So much for sneaking in and out. But if dialogue proved more expedient for learning what I'd come to find

out…

"Wait," I said as the robed figures moved nearer. "I've come to warn you."

The whisperer, who I took to be the head druid, let out a chilling laugh. "*And he will appear unto mortal eyes as saintly, and earnest and righteous will seem his pleas, but do not be ye deceived, for he ariseth from the darkest pits and bringeth death and ruin.* So the stars have foretold it."

I realized he was quoting from early pagan scripture, an omen that spoke to the return of Sathanas, demon lord of Wrath, the last to be cast from the world by Michael. I'd discovered in my research that the early druid cults defined themselves in part by the stars they consulted. The stars used by one cult in particular pointed to the present age for Sathanas's return. That cult was *Nigra Terra*: Black Earth.

"Whoa, there," I said. "I'm not the death and ruin guy, I promise. I'm a wizard, a magic user like yourselves—"

"Who comes bearing the stink of demon."

I paused to sniff my shoulder. Damn. Not only was my stealth spell starting to wear off, but the smell from my shrieker encounter three nights before lingered like cheap perfume.

"I can actually explain that," I said.

"Can you explain, oh *wizard*, why you were seen fleeing a demonic summoning?"

I hesitated. These guys read the *Scream*?

"Since you ask, yes," I said, "but that's not why I've come. There's talk among city officials of cracking down on magic users. I'm not sure to what lengths they're planning to go—mass evictions, arrests, worse—but I'm trying to warn all of the groups I know before it happens. We need to unify."

It was a whopper of a tale, but if it gibed with the Black Earth's reasons for killing the rector—the voice behind the campaign to crack down—maybe they would reveal as much to someone who appeared sympathetic.

"Yes, we have heard." My pulse ramped up in anticipation of a confession. I'd finally have something for Detective Vega. "But the city and church are not the threat," the druid continued. "It is you, fiend."

My shoulders sagged. *Or not.*

I tried to see the situation from the druids' perspective. Per their star charts, the return of Sathanas was nigh. Now, in the midst of a spate of shrieker summonings, a man wanted by the police, and smelling like demon, suddenly turned up on their doorstep, claiming to offer help.

Sketchy as hell. I got it.

As though picking up my thoughts, the druid said, “Yes, unify us so you may betray those with the power to stop you. We are not so easily fooled.”

The bloody message on the rector’s robe notwithstanding, I decided this Black Earth wasn’t responsible for his murder. The cult was too obsessed with preventing Sathanas’s return, and compromising the power of the cathedral would only empower a demon lord. “Black Earth” had either been written as a red herring, or it meant something completely different.

Either way, I wasn’t going to fight these guys.

“Great,” I said. “Well, think I’ll head on home, then.”

The robed figures shifted into my path. The head druid spoke at my back, but he was no longer using English. I recognized the language as a variant of Latin, similar to what I used for my own Words of Power.

Which meant—

I threw a light shield up just as searing fire broke around me. In the sudden blaze, the remaining druids became illuminated. From the shadows of hoods, tattooed lips peeled from purple gums and fierce teeth. Wands of what looked like burned ash appeared from billowing sleeves.

Fire casters. And here I’d been hoping for the meadow-prancing type of druid. I aimed my sword at the one blocking my path and shouted, *“Vigore!”*

The energy that coursed down the blade slammed the druid from his sandals and into the trees. The rippling wake knocked two more druids onto their backs. An opening! I hit the gap at a run, calling more energy to my staff and shaping it into a protective dome of light.

I grunted as fresh fire jetted hot against it.

After the day’s encounter with Bashi and the White Hand, I wasn’t in any shape for an extended battle. Especially not when I was outnumbered by magic users, who, by the force of their casting, must have been calling up power from a god. It also explained how they were able to create a refuge for themselves in Central Park. Trying to match them blow for blow would only bring on Thelonious, which was the last thing I needed tonight.

“Face your doom, fiend!” the head druid called.

Nope. I’d made the trail and had no plans of turning around.

But I’d barely hit my first full stride when a stone from the crumbling arch tumbled into my path. *Damned druid magic.* I managed to leap that one but a second stone materialized beneath my landing foot. I hit it awkwardly, and pain flared through my folding ankle. I stumbled and went down.

Robes shuffled up behind me. I rolled onto my back, ready to nail

them with another force invocation. But I couldn't even raise my sword arm. I strained through gritted teeth and tried to assist with my staff arm, but it was like hefting a pair of dead animals. My tongue and lips garbled around a word that hadn't the power to invoke anything.

…the hell?

That was when something warm and wet spread across the front of my pants. *Well, craptastic.* I had loaded the encumbering potion into a squirt gun, which I'd holstered into my waist band—and apparently just crushed. The contact with my skin was releasing the potion's magic, not to mention the god-awful stench, transforming me into a smelly, dull-witted slug.

Fourteen all over again, basically.

The druids swooped around me, ember-tipped wands aimed at my face. With no Words to resurrect my shield, I was as good as cooked. I released my sword and staff at sloth speed and showed my hands.

"Whhuuaaiit," I slurred.

The lead druid emerged through the others and stood over me. The hood had fallen away to reveal a shiny shaved head and strong face, ebony skin patterned with intricate white lines. Like my mental prism, the tattoos were designed to channel energy. The druid's eyes, a fierce turquoise in the light of the wands, searched mine. When the druid spoke again, I realized the person wasn't a man, but a woman—their high priestess.

"Raise it up," she ordered.

It? I thought. *Oh right, the demon.* I glanced around at the others as they stooped down. Though they remained hooded, I guessed by their movements that they were all women.

Several of them seized me beneath the shoulders and hoisted me to my feet. I stepped gingerly, and very slowly, on my twisted right ankle. I should have been terrified, but the potion was fogging my fear. When the priestess looked me up and down, I was more concerned that the leaking potion and smell had them all thinking I'd wet my pants.

The priestess smiled around filed teeth. "A demon is no match for the fire of Brigit."

I was pretty sure a demon as powerful as Sathanas could flick the pagan god to which she was referring like a paper football. But even if I'd wanted to point that out, I couldn't form the words. Plus, she was moving her wand dangerously close to my face, its glowing tip drawing sweat from my pores. I tried to lean away, but it was as though my body were bound in a slow-drying cast. Exactly the effect the Plaster of Paris ingredient had been meant to induce.

"First," she said, wand hovering just above my right cheek, "we

burn out its eyes."

That she was referring to me in third person neutral was chilling enough. But the pain that had begun to build across my cornea and now pierced, searing, to the back of my eye socket was far more troubling. I shut my eyelids to the heat, but she forced them open with a bracing finger and thumb.

I let out a low moan, which made the priestess show more of her teeth. This was *not* good. Arnaud and Bashi were dangerous, but at least they possessed some capacity for reason, however warped. This woman had none. It was written in her staring eyes. Her existence had come to revolve so completely around the return of Sathanas that every interlocutor now looked like a demon.

"That it may no more curse us with its evil sight," she promised.

When my vision blurred, I hoped it was from tears and not the melting of my lens. Either way, it wouldn't be long before my right socket was a smoking crater. When the priestess sucked in her next breath through the sharp spaces of her teeth, I knew it was to summon fire.

And that brought my fear screaming back.

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I tried again to speak an invocation of protection, but I might as well have been talking through a mouthful of oatmeal. The priestess took her time pronouncing her own Word, the tip of her wand swelling orange hot, strong fingers bracing my eyelids wide.

"*Ustili*—garrh!" she grunted.

Huh?

The heat and glare fell away. She dropped the wand and dug both hands into the neck of her robe, which appeared to be throttling her. I tottered for balance as the others released me. My head rotated slowly from side to side.

The robes were wrapping all of their necks, strangling them like boas.

I didn't know what the hell was happening and didn't much care. My eye was intact, even if a blinding glare remained. Turning, I forced my arms and legs into an absurd underwater run. My sword and staff were on the ground where I'd relinquished them. I was bending in slo-mo to retrieve them when a shaking force nailed me between the shoulder blades.

I reflexively hooked a finger into the front of my shirt collar. But instead of struggling to breathe, I was no longer struggling, period. My limbs were fluid again. I exercised my jaw and tested my voice: "Do-re-mi-fa-sol…" Someone had broken up the effect of the encumbering potion.

Sword and staff in hands, I swung around.

"The animation spell's not going to last," someone said in an Irish brogue. A short, rumpled figure hustled from the gagging druids and seized the sleeve of my coat. "We need to get a move on."

"Chicory?" I asked, stumbling to keep up.

In the year since I'd last seen my mentor, he had gained a bit of weight. Even so, his feet were a blur. Instead of crossing the stream, he led me farther down the path I'd arrived by, his coat flapping around his stubby legs, then up to where the path joined a defunct road. His gray Volkswagen Rabbit sat against the near curb. As he shuffled around to the driver's side, I peeked back, relieved to find no one—and nothing—in pursuit. The diesel engine chugged to life as I

dropped inside and slammed the door behind me.

"Man, talk about timing," I said, inspecting my right eye in the visor mirror. It was red and puffy around the rim, but otherwise healthy. "How did you know—"

"Magic," Chicory said, tossing his wand into the back seat, curmudgeonly face set in a frown. Then to clarify: "*Forbidden* magic."

"You mean theirs?" I tried.

He stared at me over a squash-shaped nose. "I mean yours."

I gave a nervous chuckle as Chicory swung the car around. "Yeah, about that…"

"You violated a mandate from the Order. *Two*, in fact."

"Well, their letter was awfully short on details. It called me off a shrieker case without saying why—or what the Order planned to do about it. And cessation of magic? Was that supposed to be a blanket mandate?"

My mentor nodded.

"What the hell, Chicory? If the Order would ever bother to ask, they might learn that I have to make ends meet around here. I also have friends in this city, good people. Keeping my job and keeping them safe require magic sometimes."

I thought I'd made a reasonable appeal, but Chicory was shaking his mop of gray hair. He looked more like a frazzled physics professor than a wizard. "It's not your place to question the Elders."

"So, what, they're gods now?"

"As far as you and I are concerned, yes."

I pushed out an exasperated breath. At our level, the purpose of magic was defending the mortal world from manifested evils. But the Elders dealt in other planes entirely, where linear thought and logic no longer held, necessarily. With their power and knowledge, the Elders *were* very nearly gods. It was what I would become one day—if I lived to be that old. When the Elders issued a decree, there was usually a very good reason for it.

But call it hubris, I still felt like they were missing something.

"Do they have a plan for the shriekers, at least?" I asked.

"I'm sure they do, Everson." His response hardly inspired confidence, but before I could press him, Chicory took up his scolding voice. "What were you doing out here anyway?" He skirted a cement barricade and merged onto Central Park West. "Picking a fight with a women's group?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I didn't know they were… Look, I thought they might be behind a murder the NYPD asked me to help investigate, all right? The rector was killed at a church I used to attend."

"Oh, yes, about that," Chicory interrupted. "The Order wants you

off that case as well."

"*What? Why?*"

"Not our place to ask."

"Well, let me spell a few things out for you, and maybe you can run it up the flagpole." I twisted my entire body toward him. "The church in question sits on the city's most powerful fount of ley energy. The balance of power in the city is already tipping toward darkness because of the crisis brought on by the vampires. We lose St. Martin's, and we may never get that balance back. New York City will become a Romper Room of evil. Father Victor, the man in position to take over as rector? I know him. He's as devoted as they come. He'll safeguard that fount. But he's also about to be slammed for capital murder by a police department short on resources and long on the illusion that they're actually solving crimes."

I hadn't quite put it in those terms before, not even in my own mind, but it wasn't a stretch. Those were the bigger stakes.

Chicory sighed. "Fine, I'll add it to my report." He glanced at the folders and spiral-bound notebooks spread over his dashboard. I noticed his back seat was jammed with boxes containing more files. I wasn't sure how many of us he was responsible for across the country, but based on the intervals between visits, probably too many. "But until you hear back from me…"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "No magic."

We rode in silence the rest of the way to the West Village.

As Chicory pulled up in front of my apartment, I peeked around. I still hadn't seen the woman Tabitha claimed to have caught watching the building. I was beginning to suspect my cat had fabricated the story to convince me she was pulling her weight around the homestead.

My gaze returned to Chicory. "Hey, thanks for bailing me out back there." I no longer had a suspect, but I'd managed to keep both eyes and my life, which was something. "And for the lift home," I added.

"Ooh, that reminds me."

I watched cross-eyed as he pressed an ink-stained thumb between my brows. "What the…? Ow!" I cried as a bolt of energy pierced my forebrain. Though the sensation quickly dissipated, a tingling pressure remained behind. "What are you doing?"

"The wards around the city could detect your magic but not your intentions. Consider yourself stamped." He said it matter-of-factly. "If you violate any of the mandates, including pursuing the matter with the church, the Order will know. That should tell you how serious they are."

"And if I do it anyway?"

"You'll find out just how serious."

I sighed and got out of the car.

"Everson," Chicory said before I could close the door. I leaned down and met his eyes, which didn't seem so frazzled anymore. They appeared dark, almost mercenary. "The Order can seem like an abstraction sometimes, but when it comes to their mandates, they're rather black and white. Trust me. I've had to take care of two wayward wizards this month already."

I felt the moisture leave my mouth. "You mean…?"

He nodded once. "Don't test them."

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I awoke early Sunday morning, having slept decently for someone who faced a deadline with an NYPD detective, another deadline with a mob boss, and a not-so-subtle threat from his mentor of being put to death if he acted on either. It probably explained the shredded feeling in my stomach.

I dressed, fixed an omelet for Tabitha, who was still snoozing, and headed out for coffee. I had some serious mulling to do.

Except for a handful of neighbors out walking their dogs, the West Village streets were quiet. The weather system that had dumped gray clouds and on-and-off rainfall over the city since last week continued to linger like a nagging cold. I wasn't feeling so hot myself.

I hustled the three blocks through the damp to my favorite caffeine stop, Two Story Coffee, and ordered a large Colombian roast with two shots of scotch. I paid for it, along with a folded-over Sunday Edition of the *Scream*, and carried both to a soft reading chair in a corner. Being Sunday, it was too early for the regulars: various artists and practitioners of the esoteric, which the particular energy patterns in the neighborhood seemed to attract.

I took a sip of coffee and sank into the chair in thought.

It seemed all of the decent options were off the table. I was looking at *least bad* now. To avoid the Order's wrath, I would have to back off the shrieker case, which meant hiding from Bashi and the White Hand for roughly the rest of my life. I would also have to walk away from the cathedral case—not that I had any new leads at the moment—but what would happen to Father Vick, not to mention the crucial role of St. Martin's in the city's balance of power?

One thing I had decided for certain was to skip my hearing at Midtown College tomorrow morning. I refused to give Snodgrass the satisfaction of watching me sink. I wasn't sure which hurt more, though: the thought of no longer being able to research and teach the subject I loved, or of not having Caroline Reid as a colleague. Would our friendship survive? And what was she going to think of me for not fighting for my position?

I sighed and unfolded the paper across my lap. The headline that took up half the front page blew all thoughts of the college from my

head.

Murder And Mayhem At St. Martin's! Rector Battered To Death! Parishioners Ask, "Who's Next?"

Despite the Church's effort, the story had gotten out. Probably a blackmail job. The paper had wanted more money and the Church had balked. The article contained nothing I didn't already know, the information attributed to a "brave source" who had requested anonymity. I snorted at the irony. I worried, though, what the story meant for Father Vick and St. Martin's.

The cathedral's power as a sanctuary against evil depended largely on a collective faith in, well, the cathedral's power as a sanctuary against evil. Challenging that faith with a graphic depiction of the murder and suggestions that there could be more to come wobbled the central struts.

Maybe exactly what someone was trying to do.

The rest of the article was garbage, something the *Scream* had unabashedly mastered. At least my likeness wasn't featured below the article.

I turned the page. Correction. At least my likeness wasn't featured below *that* article. Because the god-awful police sketch was back, on page two. I raised my eyes to the headline—and nearly spilled my coffee.

The Eviscerator Strikes Again! Soho! Chelsea! Spanish Harlem! Murray Hill!

My eyes rocketed up and down the columns, grabbing the relevant information, slamming it into something coherent. Four more murders since Friday night. Two men. Two women. The info on the victims was sketchy, but they had all been slain in the same manner as the Chinatown and Hamilton Heights victims—hence my reprisal as lead suspect and creep job.

I closed my eyes to a corkscrew of dizziness. Had those same shriekers reappeared to feed? I shook my head. No, these sounded like the just-summoned variety. No signs of entrance, smashed windows for exits.

"Plan for the shriekers, my ass," I grumbled as I recalled the assurance Chicory had given me in the car last night. There were now at least six of them loose in the city, up to God knew what, and the Order wasn't doing a goddamned thing. The thought knotted the muscles in my neck.

And why hadn't my alarm alerted me? The city hologram should

have lit up like a supernova. Cold understanding stiffened my spine. The Order had cut me off from their wards. Hence, the hologram's silence the last couple of nights.

I took a large swallow of coffee, more for the alcohol than caffeine, and flipped between the two articles in thought. *Oh, yes, about that*, Chicory had said when I'd brought up my work on the cathedral murder last night. *The Order wants you off that case, as well.*

Now why would that be? I could understand their concern with an incubus-toting wizard getting mixed up with demonic beings, but what danger did Thelonious and I pose to an investigation into a rector's murder?

Unless…

My hand went still, the paper poised between the cases.

Unless there's a connection.

I thought back to the Bible I'd found in the East Village conjurer's apartment. I'd written it off as incidental, but now I wasn't so sure. Had the vagrant been linked to St. Martin's, somehow? Ditto the Chinatown and Hamilton Heights conjurers? The four listed here in the paper? Had the same person who supplied their spells murdered the rector?

There was someone who could probably shed light on those questions—only I was forbidden from speaking to Father Vick by Detective Vega and now the Order.

I touched the place on my forehead where Chicory had mashed his thumb. He'd hit me with a binding spell, a psychic tether that created a one-way conduit for my thoughts. The pressure of the spell lingered in my brain like a subsiding headache.

A friend, I told myself—and anyone who might be eavesdropping. *I'm only going to visit Father Victor as a friend.* And then, because I was so fed up with the Order, *If that's a crime, we can discuss it in hell.*

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33

Because it was Sunday, the line for the pedestrian checkpoint on Liberty Street was nonexistent. I went through the same motions I'd gone through the last two times, showing my NYPD card and Midtown College ID, even managing to affect impatience. But the longer the guard's impassive shades remained fixed on my ID, the more unnerved I became.

For the first time, I noticed the small black eye of a camera in the corner of his sunglasses. The camera was beaming the info on my ID to a monitor and whichever technician was talking into the guard's earpiece. After another minute, the guard handed my ID back.

"About time," I muttered, going to step past him.

The palm that met my chest knocked me back several steps.

"Hey, what gives?" I shouted, more in surprise than pain.

"You're forbidden entry."

"Why?"

"You're on the list."

"What list?"

"The forbidden-entry list."

"Gee, thanks for the clarification. Can you tell me who put me on it?"

The guard crossed his thick arms to signal he was done talking. One of the perks of bearing body armor and an assault rifle. I peered past him to where the massive towers of the financial district thrust upward into a gray haze. Arnaud must have known I'd come yesterday morning. He'd put me on his naughty list, alongside the anti-capitalists and bomb-happy anarchists. He must have also included a note to have my NYPD card confiscated, because that was what the guard had done, I now realized.

Shit.

I looked up and down the length of the imposing wall before stepping up to the guard again.

"Look," I said quietly. "Your X-ray didn't pick up anything, right? I'm only going to St. Martin's to meet an old friend, then I'm shooting straight home. You can call the cathedral to check. They'll confirm it."

The guard's arms remained crossed, his gaze leveled above me, as

though I was the annoying neighborhood kid who, if you ignored long enough, would eventually slouch off. Maybe I was in luck. Most of the other guards would have beaten me into the pavement by now.

I opened my wallet, removed my remaining big bills—over one hundred dollars—and folded them into the palm of my hand, behind my ID. Though the guard's head didn't move, the tension in his neck told me his eyes were observing me. He was a mercenary, after all. Money spoke.

"There must have been a mistake," I suggested, holding out the ID with the bills concealed underneath. "Maybe you could take a second look?"

The guard remained statue stiff for long enough that I was sure it was a failed bid. But he had only been waiting for the guard off to his right to turn away, because his hand shot out like a piston and seized the ID and tightly-folded stash. He didn't hold the ID to his shades this time. It went in and out of the front pocket of his pants, as though he were cleaning it.

"You don't report back within one hour," he said in a low voice, handing me back the ID sans cash, "and I'll bag you and drag you out myself."

I nodded earnestly. He could just as easily have pocketed the money and denied my entrance a second time, even shot me dead on the pretense of rushing the checkpoint. Now I was only at risk of being shot for failing to return by—I glanced down at my watch—ten after eleven.

"That won't be necessary," I assured him.

But I was sure as hell going to have to hurry.

DESPITE WHAT I'D suggested to the guard, I didn't have an appointment with Father Vick. I arrived at the steep bronze doors of the cathedral, surprised to find them closed and locked. A sign announced that Sunday Mass would not be held. Future services had been suspended "until further notice." Maybe because the wording mirrored my cease-and-desist mandate from the Order, I feared the worst—namely Father Vick having been arrested.

I pressed a button beside the right door. A metallic buzz sounded from deep inside the cathedral. A minute passed. I was preparing to buzz again when I heard the clunking of bolts. After another moment, the right door opened, and the groundskeeper's squinting face backed from the light.

"Cyrus," I breathed. "It's Everson. I met you yesterday morning? I need to have a word with Father Victor. Is he in?"

I spoke with the urgency of someone on the clock and wasn't sure Cyrus had caught it all. Beneath his combed-over wisps of white hair, the folds of Cyrus's palsied face alternately winced and sagged as he studied my lips. "He's unwell," he rasped after a moment.

"But he's here?"

"In bed," the old man confirmed, causing me to exhale in relief.

"Please, it will only take a minute, and it's extremely important."

When Cyrus stepped to one side and waved for me to enter, I hoped the gesture would be enough to temper the threshold. It was, but it might not have mattered. The force that rippled through me was less than half the strength I'd felt on Thursday, and left much of my wizarding powers intact.

Cyrus closed the door behind me and locked it.

"I know the way," I told him, not wanting to wait on his frail lead.

I replicated the route Father Vick and I had taken the morning before, until I was crossing the inner courtyard and standing in front of the vicarage. The door was open a crack, and I could make out a slice of Father Vick's tall figure beneath the white covers of his bed.

I knocked. "Father?"

The bed creaked as he lifted his head. "Is that Everson? Come in, come in."

I entered and returned the door to its cracked-open state behind me. A smell like stale gauze hung thick in the room. By the time I turned back to Father Vick, my eyes had adjusted to the dimness, and I paused to take him in. True to Cyrus's word—though paraphrasing slightly—he looked like crap. His pale red hair was thin and scattered. What I mistook for bald patches in his beard were spots that had gone white, probably less evident when his beard was combed. He blinked with boggy eyelids, but his eyes exuded the same paternal concern.

"Please, have a seat," he said.

I pulled a chair up beside the bed. "I'm sorry to disturb you. I wanted to see how you were doing."

"You read the article?"

I nodded.

As his head rested back on the pillow, he exhaled. "I was to have told the congregation today, in morning Mass. I spent much of the night preparing the service and in prayer."

Holy books stood in stacks on his window-facing desk. Beside the books hung his white kerchief.

"I saw the sign out front," I said.

"The congregation is in a panic. I … I don't know what to do."

As he spoke, I caught what looked like tissue paper balled into his right ear canal. His nose had bled too, bits of red crust clinging to the top of his mustache. I recalled what he'd said about channeling forces

beyond us, and could only imagine the kind of strain he was under. The faith in the cathedral was similar to my mental prism—a converter of ley energy. Right now, Father Vick was having to make up the faith deficit, and it was killing him.

"The Bishop of New York is coming today," he said, but the worry in his eyes confused me.

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Well, the visit is avowedly to chart a path forward, though I think that's a kind way of suggesting the Church wants to conduct its own investigation."

So in addition to the NYPD, he was under suspicion by his own ecclesiastic authorities. I knew the gut-punched feeling. I gave his arm a squeeze of support, which seemed to warm his face.

"And how are you, Everson?" he asked.

"Concerned."

He raised his eyebrows slightly. Though the protective energies of the cathedral had weakened, I sensed it blowing static through the monitoring spell Chicory had placed on me. With that bit of cover, I proceeded.

"There's work I do in the city that not many know about, but I think you would understand." I watched him nod in encouragement. "The Crash rocked the ground under a lot of people. Many fell to vice, but others reached for magic. You help the first group, Father. I try to help the second." Something in his eyes told me he knew, or at least suspected, this to have been the case. "Lately, the kinds of emergencies I've been called to have been especially black—demonic summonings. Lower creatures, granted, but I think something bigger is working its way up the pipe."

Father Vick's gaze shifted to the ceiling. "I've felt it, too," he said after a moment, his voice nearly a whisper. "Like a force eclipsing the sun, casting everything into dire shadow." He shook his head. "I tried discussing it with Brother Richard, but he was preoccupied with the magic use in the city, much of it benign, of course. I'm afraid my concern fell on deaf ears."

I thought about my own appeals to the Order.

"What can we do, Everson?" he asked, his voice possessed by sudden strength.

"If we trace the summoning spells back to their source, we'll know who or what we're dealing with. That would be a start." Not wanting to suggest the church was behind the spreading evil, I proceeded carefully. "I was actually hoping you know or at least encountered the first conjurer. I found him squatting in an East Village apartment. He had a St. Martin's Bible in his possession." I described the man in as much detail as I could.

When I got to the glasses, a look of recognition came over Father Vick's face.

"Yes, yes," he said. "That would have been Clifford Rhodes. We have an outreach group that offers spiritual guidance to the homeless. Clifford was well known to us. When he disappeared, we feared the worst. It grieves me to hear he turned to dark practices. But he's alive?"

"Last time I saw him, yes. The other conjurers weren't as fortunate."

I told him about the Chinatown conjurer next, Chin Lau Ping.

"That was from a summoning?" he asked, sitting partway up.

"You knew him, too?"

"He was an informant, in Brother Richard's campaign against the White Hand."

"So he approached the church?"

Father Vick nodded. "The White Hand pressed Chin into service because he drove a bus and had a clean record. He transported narcotics, and often women, to other cities. Chin wanted nothing to do with it, but the White Hand made it clear it was the cost of doing business in Chinatown. When I read about his murder, I thought the White Hand had found him out."

I took a steadying breath. *So far, two for two.*

"What about Fred Thomas?" I asked. "A young man from Hamilton Heights?"

Father Vick's face creased as he searched his memory for the name.

"He went by 'Flash'," I remembered.

"Flash," Father Vick repeated. "Yes. I read about him, too. Another summoning?" He let out an aggrieved sigh. "He attended one of St. Martin's parochial schools for a time. It was a pilot program for inner-city youths who couldn't otherwise afford the tuition. A prank got him expelled, I remember, but he was good hearted. Afterwards, he showed up to a few of our youth services."

I removed the newspaper I had folded and tucked inside my coat, and opened it to the second page.

"Did you know any of them?" I asked.

Sitting up, Father Vick took a pair of reading glasses from his nightstand and frowned over the article on last night's quadruple slaying. I watched his face go from pale to a blotchy ashen. "Good God," he muttered. "These three were parishioners, and she participated in the city's Interfaith Council."

"Father," I said carefully, "I think we have to consider that the spells came from someone inside the cathedral."

"From here?"

"It's the common factor." I allowed a moment for the fact to sink

in. “I think we also have to consider that whoever supplied the spells may have murdered your rector. Father Richard may have been onto what this person was doing.”

Father Vick removed his glasses and set them aside. He looked destroyed.

“Did the rector ever share any concerns with you?” I probed. “About anyone here or in the congregation?”

“Not that I recall,” he answered after a moment. “He was a stoic man, praying on problems before acting on them. So even if he’d had such concerns, I wouldn’t necessarily have known of them. His concerns tended to be more external, anyway. The corruption he observed in the city. The practice of magic. He *was* uncomfortable with the archival work, though.”

“Your acolyte’s research?” I asked. “Why?”

Before he could answer, a soft knock sounded at the door. I looked over to find the acolyte himself peering through the crack. I wondered how long he’d been standing there, listening.

“Father Vick?” he asked.

“Yes, what is it Malachi?”

“The, um, bishop called to say they’re a half hour out.”

Father Vick nodded and pushed the cover from his legs. “I suppose I should get ready, then.” When he sat up, blood spattered the lap of his robe. I rose in alarm before realizing it was falling from his nose.

I stretched past Malachi, who was standing slack-armed in the doorway, and reached for the kerchief on the desk.

“No, no,” Father Vick said, plugging the bleeding nostril with a thumb. “The tissues.”

I followed his finger to the windowsill and pulled several tissues from a plain box of them. He accepted the wad with a grateful nod and, after wiping his bearded mouth and chin, held it to his tipped-back nose.

“That’s a heritage item,” he said of the kerchief.

“Ah, sorry.”

I looked around, but Malachi was no longer in the doorway. His robed form flashed beyond the window, lank ponytail falling over the hood bunched behind his neck. Remembering the hooded man Effie’s ghost friend had observed in the graveyard, suspicion spiked hot inside me. I wheeled back to Father Vick.

“What was it about Malachi’s work that bothered the rector?” I asked quickly.

Father Vick had gotten control of the bleeding and was now dabbing around it. “Oh, he just believed some things should remain in history. Because of the power of this site, I suspect, the church wasn’t always represented by honorable men.”

I needed more, but at that moment the church bells began to ring out the hour.

I checked my watch. Crap. I had ten minutes to get back to the checkpoint.

“Can I call you later?” I asked.

“Of course.” Father Vick wavered to his feet but embraced me with warm strength. I reciprocated. “You are exactly what Father Richard didn’t understand,” he said, “that the relative good or evil of magic depends entirely on the channeler. Though darkness clings to you, Everson, your foundation remains as solid and pure as when I first taught you. It is why you were called back here. Remember that.”

In many ways, he had been my first mentor—and a great one.

“Thank you, Father. I’ll try.”

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Assuming my watch was synced to the guard's, I had less than twenty seconds to spare by the time I arrived, panting, at the pedestrian checkpoint.

I'd risked precious time by having Cyrus let me out through the graveyard again, but I'd wanted to inspect the mossy tomb beneath the willow tree. If Effie's friend was to be believed, someone had been creeping around the site in the dark of night, muttering what might have been an incantation. And I was beginning to suspect that person had been Malachi. I found the raised sarcophagus sealed tight, the ground around it apparently undisturbed.

I read the deceased's name and dates: *Bartholomew Higham, 1772 – 1824*. No other information. It wasn't until I pulled out my notepad that I remembered my small pencil was absent from its spiral binding. I resorted to cramming the info into my memory, hoping it would stay.

"Where's the fire?" a guard asked as I hurried up to the checkpoint.

I looked from him to his partner. Neither was the one who had let me through an hour before.

"Where's the other guy?" I asked, breathlessly. "The one who was here earlier?" The last thing I needed was for someone else to be hunting me for having violated some agreement.

"What's it to you?"

"I, ah, I knew him," I replied lamely.

"Well, not anymore," the guard said.

The second guard opened his mouth to join in—it was a slow day at the checkpoint, evidently—but then paused as though someone was speaking into his earpiece. He nodded at the first guard, who, without comment, stepped forward and drove the barrel of his rifle into my gut. I grunted and dropped to a knee, the impact leaving me sick and gasping. From my new vantage, I noticed a smear of reddish oil on the pavement below my face.

Wait … blood? My bribe had gotten the guy killed?

"If you don't wanna join your friend," the guard said, wrestling with my hand now, "you're gonna give this up." I realized he was

trying to pull Grandpa's ring off my finger.

Arnaud, I thought. By his reasoning, I had entered his territory; ergo, he had rights to my ring. I balled my hand against the guard's wrenching fingers. I was risking my life, yeah, but the ring seemed to be compelling me—it had some future role to play, and it wouldn't do to be in a vampire's possession. My hand balled tighter, gripped by the mother of all cramps. If my own life played a role, it appeared it was going to be as a footnote.

"Tough guy, huh?" the guard said, ramming an elbow against my ear for leverage.

I was angling my cane toward him, wondering what the penalty would be for magic exercised in self defense, when his partner entered my peripheral vision.

"Stand back," he said, raising his rifle.

Before I could summon my light shield, a pair of explosions sounded. In the ringing aftermath, I recognized the register. I opened my eyes and blinked twice. The shots hadn't come from an assault rifle.

"NYPD," a familiar voice shouted. "Get the fuck away from him!"

I raised my face to find Detective Vega storming toward us. She lowered the nine millimeter she'd fired until it was level with the nearer guard's head. He backed away, palms showing. His partner adjusted his rifle's aim from me to Vega, but he looked hesitant before the tiny tornado in a black suit.

"This man's wanted in an investigation," Vega said, using her free hand to haul me up. The guard who'd been grappling for my ring began to stammer. Before his words could take on intelligence, Vega was pulling me toward her sedan, which she'd left idling at the auto checkpoint.

I wasted no time getting in. She joined me on the driver's side and drove us from the Financial District.

"What in God's name are you doing?" she demanded.

"I *was* making friends," I said. "Sheesh. Now they'll never call." I was buying time until I could determine just how much she knew about my morning excursion.

"Were you at the church?" she asked.

The inflection in her tone told me it was an honest question. I'd caught a break.

"Um, sorry, but were you not just witness to my near-execution?" I jerked my head back. "I was kidding about being pally-wally with those guys, in case you missed that, too."

"You were *intending* to go to the church, though."

"Can you prove it?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ripping off a string of Spanish curses, Vega accelerated around a

line of cars, blooped her siren, and shot through a red light. “You’re lucky I had business downtown,” she said when she’d calmed down enough to return to English. “Those guys could’ve put two dozen bullets in you, and the NYPD wouldn’t have been able to do a damn thing.”

“Why not?”

“Official immunity,” she grumbled.

I nodded in understanding. Probably one of Arnaud’s conditions for bailing out the city. Which also meant that if the guards had gotten it into their meaty heads to gun down Vega, they could have done so without fear of prosecution. Boy, did that make me feel like a dick.

“Hey, listen—”

“Save it,” Vega said sharply. “The next words I want out of your mouth are what you can tell me about the message. Today’s the deadline. In case you forgot,” she added wryly.

“Well—”

She cut me off again. “Not here. My office.”

We emerged from underneath the off ramp for the Brooklyn Bridge and into view of One Police Plaza. I had a sinking sense of déjà vu. The last time Vega had driven me here, it was for processing.

She veered into a secure underground garage. We rode an elevator up in silence, stopping every floor or two for plain-clothed personnel and uniformed officers to get on and off. I caught more than a few sidelong glances. It was my six-foot frame, dark brown hair, and cane. I could all but feel my face being lined up with the police sketch and had a feeling Detective Vega was the only reason I wasn’t being slammed against a wall and cuffed.

I edged closer to her.

On the eighth floor, I followed her off the elevator and down a hallway to a busy workspace whose cluttered desks and colony of Styrofoam coffee cups shouted HOMICIDE. Of course, I’d been here before, so I was cheating. Vega led me into a windowless office—not an interrogation room this time, thankfully—rounded a desk with piled-up folders and an outdated computer, and sat down hard. I scooted up one of the folding metal chairs.

“Speak,” she said as I lowered myself.

I had already decided to be as truthful as I could. I owed her that much.

“All right.” I laced my fingers, save my splinted pinky, and bent them back until they cracked. “The message on the rector’s back translates to ‘Black Earth.’”

“What does it mean?” she asked, jotting it down on a notepad.

“I don’t know.”

She stared up at me as though there had to be more. I shrugged.

"I gave you three days for *that*?" She threw her pen at the pad.

The pen ricocheted and collided into a propped-up frame, knocking it onto its felt back. When I reached forward to right it, I saw it held a photo of a smiling Detective Vega—white teeth and all—clutching a giggling boy of five or six, her chin propped on his feathery curls.

"Your son?" I asked.

"Yeah," she replied, her frustration seeming to have gotten lost for the moment. She took over the task of righting the frame, angling it toward her, where I could no longer see the photo.

"Good-looking kid," I said. But then so was his mother. And I'd been right about her smile—wow. I blamed Thelonious for flicking my eyes to Vega's left ring finger, which was unencumbered. *Dream on, pal.* I thought at my incubus. *A homicide detective and a probationer?*

"Something funny?" Vega asked, her face creasing with renewed sternness.

I'd snorted at my own thought, apparently. I tried to cover it up with a second snort meant to sound functional. "Allergies."

"I thought you were pursuing some kind of lead." She gestured to the pad. "Is there a group that goes by this name?"

I searched the wall of aged vertical filing cabinets behind her. I didn't want to think about what would happen to Detective Vega if she showed up in that crazed cult's midst. "It turns out there isn't."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Guess we're gonna have to see what we can do with this," she said of the message, but without much hope.

I leaned forward. "Look, I know I come off as a smart aleck sometimes, but I meant what I said about Father Victor yesterday. It's not in his nature to raise his voice, much less act violently. And I couldn't find any connection between him and this Black Earth." The image of the vicar's ill face and bleeding nose wavered in my mind's eye. "The man is under incredible strain. Arresting him would … well, not to sound overly dramatic, but it could kill him."

I was thinking of Father Vick's health as well as that of the cathedral.

Detective Vega shrugged. "We have to go where the evidence takes us."

"Just make sure that's what you're doing." Though I tried to offer it as a suggestion, it came out sounding critical. I expected her eyebrows to crush together, but instead, an odd look came over her face.

"Since we're done here," she said, "I'm gonna need you to hand

over your notes on the case."

"Yeah, sure." In my relief, I quickly withdrew my notepad, tore out the pages relevant to the message, and pushed them toward her. My scribblings were mostly illegible, but she wasn't trying to read them. Her dark gaze had remained fixed on my notepad.

"Lose something?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?"

She pulled open a desk drawer, reached inside, and held up a clear Ziploc bag. My stub of a pencil, which used to ride in the pad's binding, was nested at its bottom. I almost asked where in the world she'd found it before realizing the Ziploc was an evidence bag.

"Now, do you want to tell me what in the hell's going on with those *other* murders?"

I maintained a poker face while my thoughts shuffled madly. They stopped on the apartment of Chin Lau Ping. I thought I'd lost the pencil at the downtown checkpoint, but I'd last used it in Chinatown, to jot down Chin's name. I must have set the pencil down when fixing his wallet.

Heat prickled over my face. "If you're suggesting that pencil's mine…"

"You have one just like it," she said. "Or used to. I saw you using it in the cathedral. And you're a nibbler, Croft."

"Nibbler?"

But I knew exactly what she meant. When struggling for a thought, I had a habit of gnawing on my writing utensils. From across the desk, I could see the teeth impressions in the pencil's green paint. My stomach performed a steep dip.

"We have your dental records on file, you know," Vega went on. "Even with our strained budget, given the priority of the cases, I could have these marks analyzed inside of a day."

Man, and I thought she'd been bluffing when she told the guards I was wanted in an investigation. Was she bluffing now? Detective Vega gave the bag a shake, her face frowning in impatience.

"I, ah—"

"*Think* before you answer," she said. "Whether or not you had anything to do with the murder, lying about being at the scene of a crime—either before or after it was committed—is obstruction and a serious violation of your probation. That spells prison, Croft."

"At least I wouldn't have to worry about unemployment," I muttered.

"What?" she snapped.

"My department chair knows about my probation. There's going to be a hearing Monday, which means I'm out of a job." I found my irritation at Snodgrass spreading to Detective Vega, for having talked

to him. Or maybe I was just fed up with authority in general. I jabbed a finger at the bag. “That’s not my pencil,” I lied. “And if it is, I don’t know how it ended up wherever it did. Maybe someone found it on the street and wanted to give it a good home.”

“Yeah, the home of someone whose organs were cleaned out,” Vega shot back. “Not unlike the victim whose apartment we found you passed out in last year. You know something, *goddammit.*”

Though her dark eyes shimmered with anger, I could also see whatever it was I had glimpsed the day she’d driven me to the cathedral. Some deeper intelligence. She blinked rapidly, and the look was gone.

“I’m sorry, Detective,” I said, “but I don’t know anything more than what I’ve already told you.”

What was the alternative? Telling her who I was and why I had been tracking the conjurers? She wasn’t Father Vick. A story like that would land me in a pen with the poo slingers and droolers. And even if Vega accepted my story, I couldn’t very well share my suspicion that the spells had originated inside the church. That would only bring more heat on Father Vick.

Detective Vega stared at me another moment. When she saw I wasn’t going to answer, she shook her head and craned her neck toward the open office door.

“Hoffman!” she shouted.

A balding man with a greasy red face came hustling in. “What’s up?”

Vega scribbled my full name on her notepad, tore the page out, and set it and the evidence bag on the corner of her desk. Her eyes darted to mine as though to say, *This is your last chance.*

When I remained silent, she exhaled through her nose. “I need a priority bite-mark analysis done on this,” she said. “It’s for the disembowelment cases.”

Hoffman, in a brown polyester suit, nodded earnestly. “I’ll run it right over.” He collected the bag and note and hustled out.

Vega turned toward me. “Guess we’ll be in touch.”

My legs wobbled slightly as I stood with my cane, unable to meet her eyes.

“Guess so,” I replied.

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From One Police Plaza I caught an express subway to Midtown and then hurried the pair of blocks to the New York Public Library.

The looming bite-mark analysis had collapsed my window for finding and stopping the spell supplier, but I had the church in my sights. The next step was finding out what I could about Bartholomew Higham, the man who had been interred in that tomb. Someone at St. Martin's, probably Malachi, had been interested in him in the days leading up to the rector's murder.

I jogged up the marble steps to the library, passing between the iconic stone lions, Patience and Fortitude, and entered through the soaring central portico. Inside the vast stone hall, I paused to get my bearings and strategize. Because the Order was listening in—and without a strong threshold to buffer me—I was trying to veil my intentions with innocent curiosity. Whether it was working or not, I didn't know and couldn't afford to care.

The clock was ticking.

Near the information desk, I eyed a bank of computers, their screens inviting me to search the library's online catalogue. I took a tentative step forward. Almost immediately, the screens began to flicker.

Dammit.

I hailed a slender, smooth-faced man behind the information desk, and he came around. His subtle aura told me he had a little bit of fairy in him—not enough to cast glamours or even basic magic, but enough to make him interesting.

"Excuse me," I said. "My eyes are really sensitive to computer glow. Would you mind entering a search for me?"

"Certainly," the part-fae replied.

I gave him the name and dates and stood safely back. A moment later he returned with a neat hand-printed list of sources. "Most of the hits are with the *New York Evening Post*," he said, looking over the slip of paper. "That's going to be in our newspaper archives, on microfilm. Will you need help with that as well?"

Because the microfilm machines were mechanical rather than digital, they would be mostly safe from my wizarding aura. "I should

be all right, thanks," I replied. "But if you could tell me how to get there?"

Fifteen minutes later I was sitting in front of a machine, a stack of small boxes holding thick rolls of film beside me. I loaded a roll and scrolled to the March 1814 issue that corresponded with the first hit. Images of aged paper and antiquated print shot past the viewer.

I soon reached the article I wanted. It was an announcement that Bartholomew Higham had been appointed the fifth rector of St. Martin's Cathedral.

So, Father Richard's distant predecessor. I jotted the fact down in my notepad, using a pencil in a box of them beside the machine. The write-up contained info about Higham's studies and past offices, but nothing to indicate who he really was. The subsequent articles were little more than mentions—ceremonies or functions that the rector had attended or presided over.

But the next one caught my eye:

Exodus From St. Martin's

I read the article with growing interest, mixing in what I knew of Manhattan's history. In the early days, the land north of present-day downtown had consisted largely of farms and fields. Graveyards, too—some of them massive, like the one Effie had been buried in. As development moved up the island, many of the graveyards were dug up and the bones relocated. Unbeknownst to his congregation, Reverend Higham had accepted thousands of remains, for a fee. When the deed came to light, the congregation feared the "fell and malevolent spirits" he had surely brought into their hallowed sanctum. Many parishioners left the church.

Was this the history Father Richard had found so troubling? Father Vick had mentioned something about the church not always having been represented by honorable men.

The final hit was an obituary for Higham, only a month after his actions had been exposed.

> *Suddenly this morning, in the 52d year of his age, the Right Reverend Bartholomew Higham of Saint Martin's Cathedral in the City of New York, was seized with an attack of apoplexy which proved fatal.*

I scrolled past his honorariums to the obituary's abrupt end.

> *Due to his condition, Reverend Higham will not lie in state. A Rite*

of Transfer of the Body will be conducted in private.

His condition? I tapped the end of the pencil between my teeth as I reread the obituary. Apoplexy, which was old-time speak for a brain hemorrhage or stroke, shouldn't have affected the man's appearance.

A thought hit me, and I bit down on the pencil.

Had he been Father Richard's predecessor in more ways than one? Murdered, too? And if so, why the cover up? Was someone trying to keep the power of the church, already shaken by scandal, from becoming further compromised?

Or had his murder been sanctioned by the Church itself?

Something told me the answer was in the cathedral archives, and it was *that* which had bothered Father Richard.

The bottom of the page showed an image of the early nineteenth century reverend in a black cassock and stole. He exuded an intense, aristocratic air. I centered the viewer on his face and zoomed in. Parted, graying hair fell to a wiry set of mutton chops growing wild from his jowls. His lips were pressed to his teeth, as though in malice. While the look might have been standard for the time, something about the man seemed … off. I zoomed in on his staring eyes and stiffened.

I'd seen eyes like that in my own work. They were the eyes of someone entranced.

The part-fae, who seemed to materialize at the very moment I needed him, helped me print off the obituary from the microfilm machine, and I hurried from the library with just enough change in my pocket to call Father Vick.

I needed to find out what Malachi had dug up in the church archives.

With my gaze fixed on a corner payphone, I never saw the man who staggered into my path. We collided, my cane clattering to the sidewalk. Something fell from him, as well. The ragged man dropped to his hands and knees and began slapping the sidewalk for what I quickly understood were his glasses.

"Over here," I said, spotting them beside a tree planter.

I stooped and lifted his glasses by a temple bound in thick tape. I looked from the greasy Coke-bottle lenses to the man, whose stringy hair draped his bowed head, and then back to the lenses.

Well, damned if I hadn't just found the East Village conjurer.

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I held the conjurer's glasses toward him and watched as he took and pressed them onto his black-whiskered face. In a city of six million, what were the chances? Then again, the nearby park had long doubled as a staging area for the homeless, who shuffled in and out of the library during the day for the bathrooms and newspapers. The conjurer had likely joined their ranks, because it was *definitely* him.

"Hey, are you all right?" I asked.

I drew closer but didn't attempt to help him to his feet for fear he would startle. He blinked as his magnified eyes floated upward. It was hard to tell where they were aimed, exactly. But his head soon cocked to the side, and something like recognition took hold in his swimming gaze.

"Y-y-you-y-*you*!" He stood and shuffled backwards in a pair of ragged tennis shoes.

I was pretty sure he didn't recognize me. The only time we'd been this close, he'd been out like a light, the filaments of his mind blown. This was mental illness talking. I decided to use it to my advantage, ethics be damned. I needed to find out where he'd gotten the spell to summon a shrieker.

"Is that Clifford?" I asked, affecting pleasant surprise. "Wow, I haven't seen you in a month of Sundays."

He hesitated, his grimy fingers wringing between the flaps of an army surplus jacket.

I patted my chest. "St. Martin's outreach service?"

I was trying to present myself as harmlessly as I could, but at mention of the church, Clifford's face contorted in what seemed pain. Tendons popped from his shaggy neck. His thick lips sputtered, but the words, as well as his breath, were trapped in his shuddering chest. When a bluish shade of burgundy spread from his cheeks to his forehead, I reached out a hand.

"Hey, are you—"

"Demon!" he shrieked, stumbling backwards.

Demon? Was he picking up the shadow of Thelonious I carried? Sometimes the mentally afflicted were also endowed with powers of perception.

"No, no," I tried, "I'm with St. Martin's—"

"Demon!" he repeated. *"You are of your father SATAN and he was a MURDERER and abode NOT in the truth because there is NO truth in him and when he speaketh a LIE he speaketh of his own for he is a LIAR and deceiveth the whole world and he was cast OUT into the earth and his angels were cast out with him…"* His words expired in a straining gasp, even as his lips continued to move. But in the mash-up of biblical passages, I'd picked up a theme.

"Who lied?" I asked.

"The demon," he whispered. "The demon in the glass."

"Demon in the glass?"

He jabbed a finger at my chest, the bugging madness of his eyes replaced by the roundness of fear. He babbled and staggered backwards. When he tripped over an ankle-high fence bordering the lawn that hedged the library, he screamed and fell. I rushed to help him, even as his backpedaling heels kicked up chunks of brown sod and his cries grew more piercing.

I only realized a loose crowd had gathered when one of their members spoke.

"Hey, man," an edgy voice said. "What's your problem? Leave the dude alone."

I turned. The dozen or so homeless advancing on me were in their twenties and thirties. They had been working students before the Crash: bartenders and baristas. Cut off from income, they'd given the middle finger to their massive student debt. Even now they wore their scavenged coats and patched pants with defiant pride, as though they were all members of the same clan. A clan Clifford belonged to more than I did. I was the outsider here.

I watched two young women separate from the group to help Clifford up.

"It's not what you think," I said, taking a step toward them. "I actually know him."

The man who'd first spoken drew up in front of me, black discs in his stretched earlobes, fierce judgment in his eyes. "Leave him. The Fuck. Alone."

The others took up positions around me. Geez, what was it about me that inspired a let's-beat-his-ass mentality? Whatever the reason, I had a lot to piece together and not a lot of time to do it.

"All right," I said, showing my palms. "I just caught Clifford on a bad day."

The group let me edge from their circle, then formed a barricade in case I changed my mind and made another go for their compatriot. I watched as, with hard backward glances, they escorted Clifford away. As much as I needed answers, I let him leave. I'd gotten some

information, scattered though it was.

I wheeled and strode for the payphone. *Demon in the glass, demon in the glass.* What in the hell did it mean? As my reflection rose up in the phone's steel body, I saw the answer.

The mirror in Clifford's apartment. It had been in the summoning room, intact, the first time I'd seen it. But on my second visit, the mirror was shattered, its round frame a mouth of silver shards. I imagined Clifford driving a fist against it in fear and horror before he clunked off with his trunk.

I thought back to the apartment of the Chinatown conjurer. Yes, there had been a mirror in Chin's summoning space, as well. And the crime photo in the *Scream* showing Flash's apartment? Another mirror.

The spells had never been written down and distributed, as I'd first thought. No, someone had contacted the conjurers, using their mirrors as portals, promising them God only knew what—money, power, salvation—and then dictating spells that would summon shriekers. And I now had a good idea who that someone was. I lowered my gaze to my chest.

Clifford had pointed right at him.

Protruding from my shirt pocket was the folded-over printout of the obituary I'd slid there. For the minute or so we'd talked, Clifford had been at eye level with the reverend's sideways face and dark stare. The reverend was the man he'd been referring to as a liar. He was the demon in the glass, and likely the hooded figure Effie's friend had seen creeping around the tomb—not Malachi.

I pulled the obituary from my pocket and stared at the image.

Bartholomew frigging Higham.

I thought back to the thousands of remains he had warehoused at St. Martin's. One of them could well have held a demon—a demon that took possession of Reverend Higham. The reverend had died, or been slain, shortly after, but if no exorcism had been performed, the demon would still be inside him.

But why emerge now? Had someone called him up, or were there other forces at work?

I crammed some coins into the payphone and punched Father Vick's number. I didn't know what the reanimated reverend was up to, but bludgeoning Father Richard and summoning lower demons? Yeah, it couldn't be good. I needed to warn Father Vick and the others. By the fifth ring, the muscles around my clenched jaw began to ache with urgency.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," I muttered.

The hard male voice that answered sounded like no one I knew. "Yeah?" it said.

“Who’s this?”

“NYPD. Who’s this?” the voice shot back.

“I’m with the diocese,” I lied. “I’m trying to reach Father Victor.”

“Well, he’s not here. He’s missing.”

“Missing?” My heartbeats punched through my voice.

“Yeah, him and the bishop both,” the officer said. “Got a manhunt going on down here. I’m gonna need to get your name and ask a few questions.”

I hung up and closed my eyes to a wave of dizziness. Was I too late?

There was only one way to find out. I hurried west toward the line that would deliver me back to the West Village. I needed to cook up another hunting spell and ready myself for the mother of all banishments.

Assuming, of course, the Order didn’t kill me first.

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"Has anyone been here?" I asked as soon as I'd crossed the threshold of my apartment. I triple locked the door and checked to ensure my magical wards were at full strength.

"No," Tabitha answered, but not from the divan.

I turned, surprised to find her on her feet for a change. She was near my reading chair, and by her posture, it looked as if I'd caught her in the middle of pacing. For some reason, her hair was stiff with static, but I was too focused on my next steps to pay her appearance much heed.

"How about outside?" I asked. "Anyone watching the building?"

I believed now that she *had* seen someone, and I was starting to suspect the long-haired person wasn't a woman, but Malachi. He could have observed me talking with Father Vick on Thursday morning, when Detective Vega brought me to the church, and then followed me home. Even if he hadn't reanimated the demon rector, he could have fallen under his influence, become a spy for him. I thought of him standing outside Father Vick's door.

"I've been out every hour and haven't seen anyone," Tabitha said, her voice edged with something. Nerves? Add that to the static, the pacing, the *very* uncharacteristic touring on the hour…

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, it's the bloody demon moon," she replied, irritably. "It's on the rise again. Gets me in a fucking state every time."

I was too stuck on her first line to rebuke her for the last. I wasn't big into consulting the star and moon cycles—my brand of wizardry didn't require it. But I knew from my study of lore that a demon moon was the fourth blood moon in a season and exceedingly rare. It carried End Times portents, if you believed in that sort of thing. But from an energy standpoint, blood moons were opportune times for casting black magic and all manner of devilry, which explained Tabitha's agitation. She was practically a demon herself.

Might the moon also connect to the reanimated reverend?

"Is there one tonight?" I asked, ducking my head to peer out a window. The low clouds had taken on a subtle red tinge.

"My urges are never wrong," Tabitha replied. "They've been

screaming at me all day to feast on male energy. In fact, if it weren't for your damned wards, I'd be long gone—and about time."

I disregarded her comment as another empty threat, but at the ladder to my lab, I turned and took in her poofed-out state again. That particular effect hadn't come from the demon moon.

"You tried to get out, didn't you?"

She narrowed her green eyes at me and resumed pacing, which told me she had. I imagined the shock the wards must have delivered. Under different circumstances, I'd be on the floor, choking on my own laughter. Instead, I said, "I warned you they were strong."

"Bite me."

Her insult was actually a reassurance, I thought as I scaled the ladder. If my wards were strong enough to keep a determined succubus spirit in, they would keep all manner of baddies out.

That was when the final pieces snapped into place.

Tabitha must have seen the change come over my face. "What?"

"I don't need a hunting spell," I said. "The threshold."

"What threshold?"

"At St. Martin's Cathedral." I descended and released the ladder. "The reanimated reverend, he isn't hiding somewhere in the city. He's stuck on the cathedral grounds, trapped behind the threshold. He can't get out. He's not strong enough." Tabitha's ears bent in confusion, but I couldn't slow down to explain. The logic was rushing out of me. "He murdered the rector to weaken the threshold. He's planning to do the same to the vicar and bishop. Extinguish two of the remaining bulwarks of faith that give the cathedral its strength. With the added power of the demon moon, he'll get out. And when he does, he'll have a small army of shriekers at his command. Shriekers he's been too weak to summon himself."

Blood pumped hard behind my eyes as I pictured the ensuing carnage. The Church had prevented it from happening in the 1800s by executing the reverend—I was all but sure of that now. Problem was, destroying the host wouldn't banish the demon. The creature had only to lie dormant in the reverend's remains—for two centuries, in this case—until the conditions were opportune.

I imagined an arriving demon moon would do.

I rushed back to the newspaper I'd dropped on the counter and flipped to the weather. Noting the times for moonrise and moonset, I did a quick calculation. The demon moon would be peaking in a couple of hours. I had to get to Father Vick and the bishop before that happened. I turned over the vicar's business card in my pocket. I'd been planning to use the card for the hunting spell, but it would only lead me to the cathedral, whose threshold would then snuff out the magic.

“So where in the cathedral are they being held?” I asked aloud. From my brief conversation with the officer at the scene, it sounded as though their manhunt had yet to turn up anyone.

A second later, I answered my own question. “Wherever Reverend Higham had room enough to store those thousands of remains without anyone knowing.” Panic flashed hot inside me. “Beneath the cathedral.”

Tired of being my sounding board, Tabitha began pacing away. “Fascinating,” she muttered. A bout of knocking froze her. We both turned. The hard knocking at the door sounded a second time.

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By the time the second bout of knocking subsided, I had a short list of candidates—none of them good guys, unfortunately.

One, it was someone from the White Hand, wanting to know who had supplied Chin the shrieker spell. The deadline was today. The damned thing of it was, I had an answer, but something told me Bashi wasn't going to accept a two-hundred-year-dead reverend. And I couldn't afford to be dragged into his basement and finger-cranked again. There wasn't time.

Two, it was the NYPD, coming to arrest me for my chewed-on pencil ending up in Chin's apartment. That would be worse. With Bashi, there was at least the chance he'd take me at my word. After all, he'd accepted that dark magic was at play. The same wouldn't fly with Vega. I'd be looking at incarceration.

Candidate number three? Arnaud's goons. I'd strolled into the vampire's territory twice now after he'd warned me away. And he clearly wanted Grandpa's ring. He wouldn't think twice about having me killed to get it. Unlike Father Richard, I was a nobody in the city.

Finally—and the one that scared me the most—was plump little Chicory, coming to execute me for violating the Order's mandates. Bullets I could handle. A dissolution spell? Not so much.

I waved Tabitha back as I stole up to the door. Gripping my cane, I peered through the peephole. My list of candidates erupted in smoke—it wasn't any of them. A thin back was to the door, brown hair falling down a khaki coat, as though the person was contemplating leaving.

Malachi?

With energy crackling around my prism, ready to cast, I twisted the bolts and opened the door a crack. Fully expecting a man's narrow face to round into view, I started to discover a woman's instead. A young woman's, and one I recognized from Midtown College.

"Meredith Proctor," I said, opening the door to my overachieving student.

"Hi, Professor." Her face looked strange, almost sinister, and then I realized I'd never seen Meredith without her glasses—or in makeup. She'd gone especially heavy on the eye shadow and lipstick. "May I

come in?" she asked.

The timing couldn't have been more horrible, but before I could give the polite version of that answer, Meredith was stepping past me. She unfastened her coat in the front and turned for me to draw it from her shoulders. It was an awkward gesture, unpracticed, and like the makeup, looked forced on someone who couldn't have been older than nineteen.

I snuck a peek at Tabitha. Over the years, we had developed a body language for when I had visitors. Her staring eyes told me everything. This was the person who had been watching the apartment building.

"So, ah, what brings you here, Meredith?" I asked, deciding to ignore the invitation to remove her coat. I reached around her to close the door.

She turned abruptly so she was inside my arms. Thick tendrils of perfume climbed my nostrils, triggering an asthmatic cough. She managed to shrug her coat away, and it thudded to the floor. The sparkling black dress that had been hiding underneath was low-cut, high riding, and completely inappropriate for a student visiting her professor.

"I'm going dancing with friends later," she explained, as I stooped for her coat and hung it on the rack. "Your place was on the way, so I thought I'd stop by. Hope that's okay."

Not rehearsed at all.

"Actually, Meredith, you've caught me at a bad time," I said, trying to sound professorial. "I'm rather preoccupied."

"That lecture on Thursday, about the *First Saints Legend*?" she continued as though I hadn't spoken. "Wow. I just have *so* many questions. About your trip to Romania, your research, your published paper."

Suspicion prickled through me at the strangeness of her voice, the timing of her visit. Aside from being a stellar student, I knew nothing about Meredith. Was she connected to the shrieker summonings, somehow? To the resurrected reverend?

I followed at a safe distance. But when she peeked back over a bare shoulder, I saw it wasn't either of those. There was another explanation for why she'd been staking out my apartment. The trance-inducing effect of Thursday's lecture? Well, it must have lingered—and judging from the batting of her mascara-caked lashes, gotten mixed up with her amorous centers.

I had a groupie on my hands, basically.

"Listen, Meredith," I said. "I'm going to have to answer your questions another time."

She clicked to the center of the loft in a pair of strappy black heels,

my words once again sailing right past. “Shall we relax on the couch?” she asked.

I tried to circle around to the front of her. “It’s not as relaxing as it looks, actually,” I stammered. My priority now was getting her back to the door. Which I’d left ajar, I realized.

While Meredith lowered herself, cooing over the soft cushion, I beat it back toward the foyer. The partially-opened door rattled in the doorframe, as though the window beside the staircase was open and pulling air from the corridor. That had never happened—

Something large landed in the hallway.

—before.

I got my shoulder into the door, forced it closed, and was snapping the bolts home when the thick wood shook against me. A moment later, a familiar pain jagged to the depths of my eardrums.

Only this shriek sounded more adult.

And there were two of them.

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I backed from the shuddering door and turned to check on Meredith. I found her across the couch, palms clamped to her ears. I'd chosen index fingers to block my own. Thanks to the wards, the demonic register of the shriekers couldn't penetrate the threshold, sparing my mental prism.

But the screams still hurt like hell.

During a brief lull, I shouted, "Get into the bathroom! Lock the door!"

When Meredith squinted up, I could see that terror had shattered her trance. She was probably beginning to wonder what the hell she was even doing here. She nodded rapidly and wobble-ran toward the back of the apartment.

I looked around for Tabitha, but she had taken off somewhere—maybe out onto the ledge, and who could blame her? With her feline hearing, the sound would have been doubly piercing.

A splintering crack sounded, and I wheeled around. I had enough time to note my front door bowing out before it was flying at me in two halves. The larger piece slammed into my left shoulder, spinning me halfway around. It took a moment for the rude clunk of dislocation to register, the bruising pain spreading from my shoulder into my neck.

I retrieved my fallen cane. In the next moment, light shields covered my ears like muffs. With the horrid sound stifled, I rammed the front of my shoulder into the steel beam that anchored the end of the kitchen counter, popping the humeral ball back into its socket. The shoulder was a recurring thing, the only upshot being I knew how to fix it. But that didn't make it any less agonizing.

The world behind my closed eyes spun, and I clenched my jaw to the throbbing pain. With a cane tap and a spoken incantation, I initiated the healing to the strained and torn tissue. At last, I turned to confront my visitors.

Sweet Jesus.

If you took a man-sized bat, crossed it with a gargoyle molded by a demented sculptor in bloody tar, you'd be in the neighborhood of the kind of creature—correction, creatures—I was facing. The two were

taking turns throwing themselves into the field that covered my threshold, sparks spattering their thorny black wings and screaming faces.

Their juvenile selves were almost cute in comparison.

But as big, powerful, and hideous as the grown shriekers were, they weren't spell casters. Against my wards, it was force against force—and, like any wizard worth his salt, I'd infused my wards with years of cumulative energy. Out there, I'd be in a world of hurt. Inside my apartment, I was safe as houses. I had only to wait until dawn for the shriekers' power to wane, whereupon they would flap off to their dark, damp hiding place to regenerate.

Problem was, I didn't have until morning. I needed to get to the reanimated reverend before he killed Father Vick and the bishop and escaped into the world. I hesitated on that thought.

The shriekers showing up now wasn't a coincidence. The reverend must have known I was a threat to him. My thoughts returned to Malachi eavesdropping on Father Vick's and my conversation that morning. He would have heard us connecting the recent summonings, as well as Father Richard's murder, to someone inside the cathedral. But how had the reverend known where to direct the shriekers, especially since Malachi *hadn't* been staking out my apartment?

Working backwards, I searched my memory for anything I might have left at the cathedral for the reverend to cast from, some specimen that would have held a piece of my essence. I was usually exceedingly careful about such things.

I came up empty, empty, empty—until I arrived at the morning I'd viewed the crime scene. Before entering the sacristy, I'd donned a pair of latex gloves and had had a net pulled over my head.

Sweat and hair.

Assuming the reverend had accessed the bag, he would have been able to cast from either specimen. But mine hadn't been the only bits of protective covering. Who else might the reverend have deemed a threat to his—

My heart missed a beat, then slammed twice as hard to catch up.

The lead detective. Vega.

I angled the phone on the counter toward me, already fishing Detective Vega's card from a pocket before realizing the second I removed the shields from my ears, I wouldn't be able to hear a thing over the shrieking. I lifted the phone, looked around, and then ran toward the bathroom, cord spooling out behind me.

As instructed, Meredith had locked the door. I waited for another break in the shrieking before knocking. "It's me!"

The knob turned tentatively, and I dispelled my ear shields just before one of Meredith's eyes appeared in the door space. Once inside

the bathroom, I shut the door against a renewed cycle of screaming. Meredith had pushed a towel against the space at the bottom of the door to stifle the sound, and I shoved it back into place with a foot. It helped a little.

"What's going on out there?" Meredith asked, hands back over her ears.

"Building put in a new alarm system," I shouted. "It's having some problems."

I set the phone on the lid of the toilet tank and dialed Vega's number. A light dome around my head would have helped, but I didn't want to cast in front of Meredith. Instead, I cupped the mouthpiece and clamped the receiver to my ear with my good shoulder. I could just make out a faint ring.

"Vega's office," a man answered.

"Is she in?"

"Who's this?" he asked.

I recognized the out-of-breath voice from earlier that day. "Is this Hoffman?" I asked in a tone I hoped sounded high ranking.

"Yeah, but—"

"There's no time for stupid questions," I shouted. "We've got a situation. Where is she?"

"Home," Hoffman said after a moment. "Kid's sick."

I remembered the little boy in the photo, and my heart rate kicked up again. I had to think fast, act fast.

"All right, listen," I shouted above the shrieking. "This is"—I gave a garbled name. "I'm working homicide in the Bronx. Got a case that's looking like some of yours down there. Gonna need to run a car by Vega's place to ask her some questions. She's over in Queens, right?" It was a shot in the dark, but I needed to get to her before another pair of shriekers did.

"Wrong borough," Hoffman said smugly. "And I'm not giving you an address. You gotta call personnel for that."

"Listen to me—"

"No, you listen to me," he shouted back. "I don't give a ratshit if you're the pope and the four horsemen are charging down Broadway. There's a protocol for getting info on our detectives. How do I know you're not some scumbag wanting to settle a score?"

As a breed, New York cops were hard to cow. Despite my initial read on the man, Hoffman was no exception. "Can I get her cell at least?" I asked, the authority deflating from my voice.

"Personnel," Hoffman repeated, and hung up.

Shit. I eyed Vega's business card. I could cast a spell to locate her, but that was going to take too much time—not only in the casting, but the tracking. No, I needed an address.

I had one more card to play. Literally.

I swapped Vega's card for the one Bashi had flicked onto my lap before having me hauled off. I peeked over at Meredith, who was sitting on the side of the tub, hands still over her ears, and dialed the number.

"Yes," a voice answered evenly.

"This is Everson Croft." I shouted to be heard. "I need to speak to Mr. Gang."

"Then speak."

"Is this him?"

"*Speak*," he said shrilly.

That I'd been given a direct line to the boss himself told me how badly Bashi wanted to nail whomever had arranged for a shrieker to be conjured in his neighborhood. I needed to use that to my advantage.

"I know where the spell came from," I said.

"Tell me."

I checked my reasoning before answering. "St. Martin's Cathedral."

Bashi repeated the name, his voice dripping with venom. Telling him the truth was a risk, but a conservative one, I concluded. The officials were missing and the church itself was crawling with NYPD. There was no one there for him to exact revenge on. Not tonight, anyway.

"Here's the thing," I said quickly. "We're dealing with a supernatural being. A powerful one. Bullets won't do anything. A job like this is going to require serious magic."

The use of *we* and *job* was intentional. I needed to get him thinking collaboratively.

"You said you were a wizard," he screamed.

"I am, but my magic's not cheap."

"Maybe I'll just have you killed. How about that?"

"Wow." I'd been expecting a money offer, but either way… "Or how about payment in information," I countered. "An address and phone number, that's all, but I need them up front."

"Whose?"

"Detective Vega in Homicide."

Any of the major crime syndicates in New York would have that kind of information—for levying bribes, threats, or to eliminate a troublesome investigator—but I only had access to Bashi. Who had gone silent.

Outside, I could hear the shriekers continuing their assault on my threshold. I only hoped the reverend had perceived me as the greater threat and cast my spell before Vega's.

"Fine," Bashi said at last. "But the job gets done tonight."

Like I had a choice. Demon moon … hello?

"You have my word," I assured him.

"Or I have your head."

Fair enough, I guessed.

I was put on hold. Two minutes later, another voice came on and gave me Vega's number and address. I jotted them down in my notepad. The address was in Brooklyn, not far over the East River. Good, because from there I would need to hightail it to St. Martin's before the moon neared its zenith—which would mean getting past the Wall again.

But first I had a bigger challenge, I thought as I eyed Vega's cell number. Convincing the good detective she was in mortal danger.

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"Croft?" Vega said, not nicely.

"Detective," I called into the cupped mouthpiece, "I need you to listen—"

"Where in the hell did you get my number? Were you the one who just called my office?"

Crap. The second that jerk Hoffman had hung up on me he must have called and alerted Vega. Fortunately, she was too irate to let me answer.

"And what's that racket?" she went on. "Are you at home?"

"Yes, but listen—"

"No, you listen," she shouted. "The analysis came back on the pencil. The marks are yours, Croft. I gave you a chance to come clean. Remember that. Dempsey and Dipinski are on the way. Try to run, and I'll up your case to felony fugitive so fast it'll make your ass hurt."

"You're in danger," I yelled into the brief space she allowed me. "You need to get your son someplace safe and then—"

"Are you threatening my family, you piece of…" The rest was lost to the noise outside.

"I'm trying to *help* you," I shouted.

Detective Vega fell silent. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said at last, coldly. "In your cell."

The line clicked off.

I hung up too, my heart pounding with anger and futility. There was no sense calling back. I would have had to go to her either way, but I'd hoped to convince her to usher her son someplace safe in the meantime. Vega wouldn't be able to hide herself. With the binding nature of the hunting spell, the shriekers would draw a bead on *her*, not where she lived. The only positive to glean from our chat was that the creatures had yet to arrive. I still had time.

But first I had to face the nightmare version of the Bobbsey Twins and then get out before Dempsey and Dipinski arrived.

I squeezed Meredith's arm until she opened her sealed eyelids. "I want you to lock the door after I step out and then stay here until well after the alarm stops. Do you understand?"

"Can't I just leave?" she asked, tears threatening her mascara.

“The alarm probably went off for a reason. You’ll be okay as long as you stay in here.”

She didn’t need to see her professor battling a pair of creatures from the pits of hell, I decided. I only prayed that if I failed, those same creatures would bugle a mission accomplished and sail home, sparing Meredith and the others in the building a messy fate.

I gave my student a nod of reassurance, then slipped from the bathroom and closed the door. I waited for the knob to jiggle, indicating she had locked it, before replacing my ear shields. In the ringing of the sudden quiet, I took a steadying breath. Then I rounded the kitchen counter until the front door came into view.

At the sight of me, the shriekers went spazoid, scrabbling up the field with taloned feet, swiping it with gnarly hands, beating it with black-veined wings. The wards held, knocking the creatures against the far wall of the corridor, which was faring far worse. Blown-out plaster and sections of wainscoting littered the floor. Thankfully, no one from the building had come up to investigate. No bloody remains among the detritus, anyway. In post-Crash New York there was a name for those who had learned to keep their heads down: survivors.

Not an option for this New Yorker.

I strode forward until I was ten feet from the door, then drew my cane into sword and staff. Under most circumstances, I would be no match for these guys. I’d barely handled their kid brother. But wards and years of cumulative energy? There was my ticket.

“Soglia,” I whispered, aligning my energy with the defenses over my threshold. My plan was to release the pent-up power into the shriekers. A daisy bomb of magical energy. If that didn’t destroy them, it would weaken the creatures enough for me to finish them off.

I fixed my feet in a swordsman’s stance as I watched the shriekers, waiting for them to hit the threshold at the same…

“Liberare!” I boomed.

For a moment all of the energy seemed to be sucked from the room. I leaned back, the force pressing my coattail flat to my calves and flapping the sides toward the warping threshold. Hanging pictures rocked on their nails. Something shattered in the kitchen. The furniture began to slide toward the exit en masse. My leg muscles screamed as my planted soles stuttered.

An instant before I could topple forward—and conclude that this had been the worst idea ever—the doorway flashed like an exploding star. Mostly away from me, thank God.

I staggered from the violent release, blinking at the bursting afterimage. Then I righted myself and powered into a run. Through the dust of demolition, I could see the doorframe hanging from the wall. Beyond the threshold, a hulking shadow twitched on the floor.

Down, but not out, dammit.

I tossed my sword up to switch to an overhand grip. Arriving above the shrieker, I plunged the blade between the spot where its wings erupted from a back just human enough to be grotesque. A mewling cry sounded as black fluid bubbled over the striated muscles. Its wings flapped crookedly, the left one twisting around to get a hooked horn into me.

I leaned away and shouted, *"Disfare!"*

With a final mewl, the shrieker exploded in a torrent of black phlegm.

A gusher caught me in the face, the demonic scent blasting up my nose. Pawing for a clean section of coat to wipe away the mess, I could hear the remaining gobs pelting the length of the corridor.

I'd pushed more energy into the shrieker than necessary, but with the amount of adrenaline pumping, who could blame me? Plus, I needed to make sure it did the job. I just hoped I'd kept enough in the tank. There was still one shrieker to go, and it was clawing its way to its feet.

Sponging the remaining gunk from my eye sockets, I backed from where the shrieker had landed, down the corridor. I could hear it stumbling from wall to wall, its wings like the slapping of canvas sails, the beginnings of a wail from its nightmarish mouth an approaching squall.

I thrust my sword toward it and shouted, *"Vigore!"*

The middling force was sufficient to send the shrieker clattering back. I staggered over my threshold into the apartment to allow the last of the gunk to evaporate from my eyes. I had just blinked my sight clear when the shrieker appeared in the doorway, clawed hands gripping the blown-out frame. Its eyes, milky and goat-like, fixed on mine. There were no wards to keep it out. With a fresh scream, it shot forward.

I slid right and slashed my sword through one of its unfurling wings, tearing sinew and vessels before notching a black horn. The impact of metal on exoskeleton rang to my elbow. I grunted and spun away as the shrieker snapped its jaw of hooked teeth at my head.

Through the ear shields, I made out Meredith's straining voice. "Is it okay to come out now?"

"Not yet!" I called back.

The shrieker went for me again, its talons scrabbling over the slick of its spilled fluids like someone trying on a pair of roller skates for the first time. Under different circumstances, the sight might have been comical. I skipped to one side and, with a hacking slash, cleaved the other wing. The shrieker fell past me into a crouch, ruined wings hugged to its body.

“All right,” I panted, drawing the tip of the blade to my hip. “Let’s call it a night, shall we?”

I focused on a spot between its wings—and slipped on a spatter of gunk. The cement floor rammed into my side, angering my injured shoulder. From my new vantage, I watched as the tears in the creature’s wings began to fuse, black tissue knotting along the repair lines.

The damage from the wards was running its course. The shrieker was healing itself.

We rose at the same time and faced off. I didn’t wait for it to make the first move. Too many precious seconds had already ticked away.

Lowering my head behind the shield that crackled from my staff, I charged. If I could get my sword through the shrieker’s core, I would hit it with a dispersive force powerful enough to get Thelonious licking his lips but not quite diving in. The still-weakened shrieker wouldn’t be able to hold itself together.

That was the theory, anyway.

In a rapid one-two, the shrieker seized my thrusting blade and brought its head down. My good shoulder exploded in white-hot pain. The creature’s teeth sunk in deeper as the horns on its wings collapsed toward me.

“*Respingere!*” I cried.

Energy from my shield shoved the shrieker off and into a wall, a bloody flap of my coat, and probably skin, jiggling from its mouth. As the shrieker righted itself, a segmented tongue emerged to grab the scraps and pull them into its gullet.

I didn’t need to see that, I thought, pressing my staff hand to my torn-open shoulder—a shoulder the wormy appendage had just touched.

But more worrying than its tongue was the creature’s regenerative powers. I wasn’t sure any level of blast, short of one that would invoke my incubus spirit, was going to do the job now.

And if Thelonious *did* escape my containment, I would be done for the night. Detective Vega? Her son? Father Vick? All dead. And if the possessed reverend succeeded in escaping the church threshold, who knew how many others would die with them? Through it all, Thelonious would drink and dance the night away, happy as a clam. And I’d awaken tomorrow to the mother of all hangovers in a city that would make the current version seem like Paradise.

Never mind whose bed I’d shared.

The shrieker flew at me. Claws raked over my shield. The impact knocked me to the floor. Flapping above me, the shrieker scrabbled its taloned feet against the shield, its foul air buffeting me in great gusts. Ignoring the pain in my shoulder, I drove my sword at its torso.

Without my legs beneath me, though, the thrust was weak, the contact glancing. I brought my sword back in time to block the horned wing diving for my neck. I had the shrieker where I wanted it, close enough to run through. But with the direction things were headed, it was going to run me through first.

Need to get the son of a bitch off me, I thought. *Regroup.*

I hit it with a force blast, which was barely up to the task. The shrieker rose, flapping, and circled the high-ceilinged room twice before I realized what it was doing: sniffing out sustenance.

I aimed my staff at the locked bathroom door. *"Protezione!"* I called.

The shrieker crashed into a shield of light energy. With another blast from my sword I could ill afford, I knocked the shrieker away from Meredith's sanctuary. It lifted off again, coming to a flapping perch on the rail that ran along my library/lab. It stretched its wings until they were gripping ceiling and wall, like some grotesque parody of the crucifixion.

As the creature stared down with evil, unblinking eyes, I could all but feel it reconstituting the last of its lost strength. Me? I could barely keep my sword and staff aloft.

The shrieker was above my hologram, though. If I could detonate the energy inside it, as I had with the wards, I might be back in business. After all, the hologram was bound to the city-wide wards set up by the Order.

The thought deflated like a sputtering balloon. *Had* been bound to the wards set up by the Order—who had duly unplugged me from their grid when they sidelined me. A quick check confirmed this.

Damn.

The shrieker's next scream shook my ear shields. I backpedaled as the shrieker tore a wing from the ceiling, sifting plaster down. It was unhooking its other wing, preparing to dive, when a hairy pumpkin landed on the back of its neck.

Tabitha!

She must have been crouched on the top of the bookcase, because now she was sinking a mouthful of teeth into the shrieker's tarry flesh. It reared back with a cry, flailing to get one of the horns on its wings into her. Tabitha flattened her head and sank in deeper.

She wasn't just wounding its physical form, I realized. Being a succubus, Tabitha was draining the creature's essence, weakening it.

The shrieker's talons scraped over the iron railing, lost its grip, and fell. With wings still writhing to dislodge Tabitha, its torso was an open book. Seizing my chance, I scrambled underneath it. Right shoulder screaming, I thrust up my sword. The blade passed cleanly through the heart of the shrieker—so cleanly, the creature's

plummeting weight flattened me.

We hit the floor together, my head cracking cement. The sensation of warm tar oozing over my hands pulled me from a daze, and I realized in horror the shrieker and I were cheek to cheek. Tabitha's green eyes appeared from behind its neck. *What the fuck are you waiting for?* they asked.

I drew air into my shocked lungs and shouted the Word for dispersion. *"Disfare!"*

The shrieker jiggled against me for several seconds, then erupted into phlegm. Tabitha went airborne in a yowling series of somersaults. She hooked her claws into a set of drapes, bringing the whole apparatus crashing down behind her divan. A string of choice words told me she was all right.

Panting, I rolled in a small pond of black gunk onto my side. As the tail end of the geyser spattered down, a creamy white light fluttered around my vision. I'd come really close to my limits with that invocation, but I'd know in a few seconds just how close. I could all but hear Thelonious's smooth, jiving voice, anticipating his night of carousing.

"Not now," I begged as his light washed in like the surf. "I'll let you out another time. I promise."

I'd begged before, but it never did any good. Thelonious was a force beyond sympathy, beyond reason. But whether it was for the urgency of my plea, or that I had just enough fumes in my tank to forestall him, the creamy white light began to withdraw. At last, it fluttered out entirely.

Thank God.

I pushed myself up, groaning. But did that mean I *would* have to let him out another night? I wiped my sword against a pant leg and sheathed it in the staff. I'd worry about whatever bargain I might or might not have struck with Thelonious another time. Right now, I had to get to Detective Vega and her kid and then to the cathedral.

"Wh-what in the world happened out here?"

I turned to face Meredith, who was standing in the bathroom doorway. As she stared over the trashed and tar-splashed apartment, it looked as if she was considering retreating back into the bathroom and relocking the door.

"Everything's fine now," I assured her. "Just a couple of pranksters."

"Pranksters?" Her gaze fell to my right shoulder. "You're bleeding!"

I looked down as if noticing the sopping mess for the first time. "Well, I'll be damned."

"We need to get you to a hospital!"

“All right, but let me grab a few things.”

I climbed the ladder to my lab. There was no time to cook potions, but I dropped the bottle of holy water and a few spell implements into my coat pockets. Otherwise, it was going to be my sword, staff, necklace, and whatever power remained in me, which was almost none.

By the time I descended the ladder, Tabitha had extricated herself from the drapery and was perched on the divan, trying to smack the taste of shrieker from her mouth. The black pools had all but evaporated, but the scent hung in the air like an evil mist. I gave my cat a thumbs up before striding toward Meredith, who was exclaiming over the ruined hallway.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” Tabitha murmured, referring to the lack of wards.

It took me a moment to realize she had also voiced her confidence that I *would* be coming back. My eyes threatened to well up. Sometimes all a person needed was the begrudging love of his cat. I opened my mouth to say this, but her slitted eyes suggested I not push it.

“And I’ll have goat’s milk,” I amended. “You’ve more than earned it.”

That got half a furry smile.

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Meredith and I arrived on the street at the same time police lights appeared down the block. Before the car's jouncing high beams could hit us, I pulled Meredith around the side of the building, into an alleyway.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "That's a police car."

I peeked around the corner. Though the shrieker battle felt as though it had lasted an hour, it had only been ten or so minutes since I'd spoken to Vega on the phone. And here were Dempsey and Dipinski, as promised. With a finger to my lips, I signaled for Meredith to keep behind me.

Confusion creased her young face. "They can help us," she whispered.

"Trust me," I said. "They can't."

The squad car jerked to a stop against the opposite curb. Dipinski emerged from the passenger side and squinted around. I had absorbed a little light from our space to be safe. The boy-sized officer looked past the alley, then adjusted his too-large hat as he waited for Dempsey to kill the engine and join him.

They started across the street at a jog, Dempsey snapping his keychain to his duty belt. With the point of my cane and a soft incantation, I undid the leather clasp, then caught the keys before they clattered to the street. Using the same low-level force, I lowered the keys gently the rest of the way. Dempsey didn't break stride. I waited until the building door knocked closed behind the officers before pulling Meredith into the street.

"Know how to drive?" I asked her.

"Yeah…?"

"Good." I scooped up the keys and handed them to her. "I need a driver."

AT ABOUT THE time I estimated Dempsey and Dipinski were emerging from the apartment building, Dempsey slapping his empty key holder,

I had Meredith take a sharp left onto Delancey Street.

"Where are we even going?" she asked.

She was driving the police cruiser only slightly faster than my late grandmother, but at least she was driving. That had taken a little convincing, but she had consented—for no other reason, I suspected, than I was a favorite professor. I was abusing the teacher-student relationship big time, but seeing as how tomorrow's hearing was going to be career ending for me anyway, I didn't feel I was risking an awful lot. And with tonight being potentially *life* ending…

"The Williamsburg section of Brooklyn," I answered.

"Brooklyn? Is that where your primary physician is?"

"It's where a police detective lives."

She stole a glance over her shoulder. "Couldn't those guys back there have…?"

"It's a long story, but no."

"What about your arm?"

"It's not as bad as it looks."

When I didn't offer anything more, Meredith trained her frowning face on the approaching suspension bridge, hands at ten and two. I sat back. The shoulder that had dislocated throbbed in a cold ache. The one that had been gnawed on flashed with hot barbs. I managed to put a little healing energy into both without Meredith seeing, then watched her work the pedals, having already taken note of what she'd done with the gear shift. My wizarding aura had knocked out the dashboard computer and GPS system, which would keep us cloaked.

"The inner roadway's clear," I said, pointing at the lane running beside the train tracks. "How about a little pedal to the metal?"

She hesitated, then depressed the accelerator. The cruiser jumped forward, plunging into the tunnel of scaffolding as the bridge lifted us up. When Meredith leaned over the wheel, something on her face told me she was starting to enjoy this. If nothing else, I was giving her permission to bend a few rules.

Five minutes later, we found the street, and a minute after that, the address. Meredith cruised past Vega's skinned-up sedan and pulled in front of the modest-looking apartment building.

"I want you to drive straight home," I told her. "Park the cruiser wherever but leave the keys in the ignition." A straight-A student like Meredith would never be suspected of boosting a police cruiser, I figured, but if someone else stole it afterwards, so much the better.

Her eyes staggered with disappointment. "What about you?"

"I'll be fine." I got out of the car, then turned around and stooped to the open door. "Thanks for your help."

"See you in class tomorrow?"

The hope in her voice made me hesitate. "You bet," I said. "See

you in class."

I closed the door and slapped the roof of the cruiser twice. She wheeled around and took off the way we'd come. I was gambling that Dempsey and Dipinski were still debating whether to call in their stolen vehicle, given that Dempsey's missing keys would suggest negligence, not to mention gross stupidity.

I hustled up the stone steps to the apartment. Like many buildings in the current era, an entrance that had once likely consisted of swinging glass doors now featured a steel monster. I tugged the handle. The door didn't move, its bolt guarded by a thick metal plate.

I looked around. At this late hour, there was almost no chance of anyone showing up for me to pull the "hey, mind holding the door? forgot my keys" routine. Given my bloody state, I was far more likely to send them screaming in the other direction.

I dug through the spell items in my pockets until I found the vial of dragon sand. I sprinkled some into the palm of a hand, then used a licked finger to lift the dark granules and press them into the keyhole.

When I was done, I whispered, *"Fuoco."*

Smoke curled from the keyhole followed by the hiss of white flames. Within seconds, the locking apparatus sagged in like a half-baked cookie. When I yanked the door, it swung open, the melted bolt plopping to the ground.

I stepped over the threshold and into an anteroom. A locked set of glass doors separated me from an empty lobby. A buzzer panel to my right listed the apartment numbers in two tall columns, with the punch-out of a speaker underneath. Almost immediately, the speaker began to crackle and buzz. Sometimes all these systems took was a little hexing, and for that I wouldn't need a spell medium. As a wizard, I *was* that medium.

I pushed a little more energy into the metal panel, then tried the door. The magnetic lock gave up its failing hold, and I was inside.

I consulted my notepad before hitting the half-lit stairwell. Vega's unit was on the third floor. Fatigue weighed down my legs as I climbed, making me think of the exhaustion I'd observed in Vega's eyes the morning she drove me to the cathedral. Twice now, I had glimpsed something else in those eyes. Some deeper knowledge.

And then the obvious slapped me upside the head.

At her door, I pressed an ear to the cracked lacquer paint. No shrieking or sounds of struggle. I raised a fist, took a second to review what I was going to say, and knocked four times hard. When twenty seconds passed, I wiped the sweat from beneath my nose and knocked again, heart pounding in anticipation.

"Drop the cane, and lock your fingers behind your head."

Not in anticipation of that, though.

I did as Detective Vega said and turned slowly. She was approaching from the staircase I'd arrived by, both hands on the grip of the nine millimeter she was aiming at my head.

"Will you at least let me talk this time?" I asked.

Though she was wearing dark jeans and an untucked white V-neck, Vega was all business. She eased beneath the dim lights of the corridor in a practiced approach, eyes level with her line of fire. Her bottom lip swelled out, and she blew a loose strand of hair from her left eye.

"Face the wall," she said. "Get on your knees."

I turned until I was looking cross-eyed at a pattern of cheap wallpaper. I thudded to one knee, and then the other.

"I imagine someone in Homicide sees a lot in this city," I began, working out the epiphany that had hit me in the stairwell.

"I didn't say you could talk."

"And some of it, maybe a good amount of it, you can't explain. Not to yourself, and certainly not to your higher ups—they want cases cleared, period. Start going to them with things that don't conform to that goal, much less reality?" I gave a rueful laugh. "Next thing you know, you're standing in traffic with a whistle between your teeth, right?"

Detective Vega, who had begun a search of my pockets, didn't respond. I heard her set my wallet and keys on the carpeted floor behind me, the blackberry scent of her shampoo mingling with the sour smells of my sweat and blood.

"So you shut away the things you've seen," I said, "the things you *know* to be out there. And it's not because you're a bad detective—far from it. It's because you're not given a choice. You believe in the mission on your shield, and you can only fulfill it from inside the system, blind and broken as it may be. Making the city safer. Protecting the vulnerable. Protecting your son."

She had moved to my coat pockets, turning out the spell items, but now I thought I felt her slow.

"It's why you listened to me tonight," I said.

"The hell are you even talking about?" she growled.

"You took your son someplace safe, like I asked. That's where you're coming back from." It was an educated guess. She could just as well have been staking out her apartment to see who might show.

"Or maybe I just want to keep him safe from you," she shot back.

I gave a knowing chuckle as she resumed her rough excavation of my remaining pockets. "Why did you bring me in on the St. Martin's investigation?"

"*That* was a mistake," she muttered.

"I'm not the only authority on ancient languages in this city. You could have gone to any number of experts, none of them carrying the

stain of probation. Care to hear my theory?"

"No."

"You wanted to size me up. You knew I had no hand in that murder last year, because when you followed the evidence, it didn't point to me. In fact, it didn't point to anything explicable. But like a good soldier, you obeyed the orders of your higher ups. You went deeper, looking for any angle that would implicate me in the man's death. What you found instead were strange rumors about who I was and what I could do. When you connected the dots, you realized I'd been trying to help the victim, even if it was in a way that didn't make sense to you."

She finished her search. I craned my neck around until our eyes met. And there was the look, the one that spoke to deeper knowledge. What I'd missed before was the angle of curiosity.

"The decision to arrest me for obstruction didn't come from you. You followed orders—and felt bad about having to, I'm sure—but you didn't forget what you'd found out. So when you needed an expert on ancient languages, you came looking for me. To see what I was all about."

Vega narrowed her gaze, though whether because I'd made her feel transparent again or that I was way off the mark, I couldn't tell. "Stand up," she ordered in a voice that could have suggested either.

"None of this changes the fact that you're in danger," I said.

"You want to tell me what you were doing at Mr. Chin's?" The pistol she held on me drifted from my head to my midsection as I rose. "Or up in Hamilton Heights, for that matter?"

"Trying to help," I said, looking directly into her eyes. "And you know that."

Her gaze moved to the torn and bloody shoulder of my coat. I could see her trying to work up her anger again, and it wasn't because she thought I was a degenerate. No, her anger originated from a struggle between her wanting and not wanting to understand a world that challenged the more rational, order-based parts of her mind, which was most of it.

"Who killed them?" she asked.

"*What* killed them," I amended, "are the same creatures that came after me tonight—and that could show up here any second."

The spell items arrayed across the floor between us seemed a boundary between the rational and the irrational, the mundane and the magical. I imagined the struggle behind Vega's hardened face. To trust me meant throwing a radical switch in her head, altering her thinking, her language.

"If you're fucking with me, Croft, so help me God…"

"I'm not."

She assessed me for another moment. An urgent timer ticked down in my head, but gaining her trust was the more immediate need. If I failed, she would arrest me, and my warning would go unheeded.

“You can lower your arms,” she said at last, giving a small nod.

Relief swam through me as I unlaced my hands and let them down.

“On whose order were those people killed?” she asked, holstering her pistol into her pants in back.

“The same person who murdered the rector.”

Her hands froze at her back, and she blinked up at me. “Come again?”

“I’ll explain, but we should probably go inside. I’m going to need to demonstrate some of what I’m about to tell you.” She didn’t stop me when I started scooping the spell items from the floor and returning them to my pockets. When I retrieved the vial of copper filings, I assessed its weight. I should have topped it off, but there was enough inside to protect Vega.

She wasn’t going to like it, though.

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"A *spirit* is behind all of this?" Detective Vega watched dubiously as I sprinkled the last of the copper filings from the vial.

To her credit, she'd remained mostly silent during my explanation.

"A demonic entity," I reminded her. "I know how that sounds, but think about the evisceration cases, all the evidence you've had to explain away. The summoning circles, for example." I stood up from the one I'd just completed. "They were in the same room as every one of the victims, contained the same casting elements. You concluded the slayings were ritualistic, but how do you explain the absence of forced entries—just forced exits?"

"We have some theories," she said in a defensive voice.

"Yeah, and I bet they require feats of mental gymnastics. But do they have the explanatory power of what I've just told you?"

Instead of answering, she glanced around her two-bedroom unit. The apartment was simple and functional, with a few potted plants. Framed photos of her son and what I guessed to be extended family lined the walls, infusing the space with color and warmth. I had chosen a spot in the corner of the living room for the circle, scooting out a small table and standing lamp. Now I followed her gaze across the room to the lone couch, one end littered with toy trucks.

When she looked back at the circle, I could see her mind working. She still didn't want to believe me, but could she afford not to? "All right," she said at last, sighing through her nose. "Show me."

I was very limited with what I could demonstrate, not only for time's sake but that my powers remained in a slow state of recharge. I reached into a pocket and pulled out a bag of clematis buds.

"The creatures we've been talking about were summoned from a place humans should never attempt to access." I crushed the bag and emptied its contents into the casting circle. "An evil place." I spread the fragrant buds around with the tip of my cane. "Rest assured, I won't be summoning from there, but this will at least give you an idea of how it's done."

Detective Vega crossed her arms and cocked a hip.

I returned the crumpled bag to my pocket and stood back. I appraised the circle, which would need to do two jobs tonight.

Deciding it looked up to the task, I pushed enough energy into the circle to close it. I trained the cane on the crushed buds next, focusing until they rustled, as though a light breeze had passed over them. With the strong scent of vanilla drifting up, I began to chant the name of something that inhabited a plane very close to our own.

"Susurle," I repeated.

"Can't believe I'm standing here watching this," Vega muttered after a minute.

In the next moment, her breath caught. A twist of light, and there it was: a small creature with a magnificent butterfly's body but intelligent blinking eyes. It fluttered around the casting column with thin orchid-colored wings before descending to the buds and picking over them.

"How in the hell did you do that?" Vega whispered, arms fallen to her sides.

"That's what a summoning looks like," I said, unable to suppress the triumph I felt.

"And it's not an illusion? That thing is real?"

"For our purposes, yes." I waited another minute. "Seen enough?" I didn't want to rush her, but I couldn't afford to expend any more of my power than necessary—especially since I still had her to protect.

Vega stared for another moment, then straightened and nodded.

I called back the energy from the buds and spoke another incantation, this time banishing the creature. With no particular designs on our world, it dissipated without a fuss. Its orchid wings glimmered out last.

"And the demonic entity talked to the victims through their mirrors?" Vega asked, still studying the spot where the delicate creature had been. She affected a hardened, professional tone, even as I sensed her mind trying to shift blocks around to accommodate this new reality. I had to hand it to her, though. She had taken it better than most people would have.

"Yes," I replied. "He would have used what's called a scrying mirror."

She repeated the word quietly. "And he had the evil creatures summoned to escape the church?"

"No, he killed the rector for that. He plans to do the same to the vicar and bishop when the moon reaches its zenith in…" My heart sped up when I checked my watch. "In less than an hour. The shriekers are to help him once he's free. The phalanx of his demon legion. He'll summon more beings, I'm sure, once he's no longer confined by the power of the church."

"Assuming this is all true, how do you deal with a spirit like that?" She gave a small snort. "Ghostbusters?"

“The only person you’re gonna call is whoever’s in charge of the search at the cathedral. I need you to suspend it, terminate it—whatever. Just get everyone the hell out of there.”

“Call it off? You’re asking a lot, Croft.”

“They’re not going to find anything,” I said. “And if they do, they’ll be massacred.”

“So who’s—?”

“Me,” I said, anticipating the rest of her question. “Alone.”

She shook her head, loose hair flipping over her shoulders. “Forget it, Croft. I’ve already given you the benefit of the doubt tonight. No way am I letting you go to a major crime scene unescorted. And with the perp and hostages on the premises? Unh-uh. I’m going with you.”

No, you’re not, I thought, *but I do need your authority*.

“Fine, first call off the search.”

She frowned at my order even as she fished a smartphone from a back pocket. “If I find out you’re playing me for a fool,” she said, her collapsing brows promising more violence than her voice, which was promising plenty, “I’m taking you down, Croft. Hard.”

“They’ll be no need,” I assured her.

She relented, scrolled for the number, and tapped it. I backed away so her phone wouldn’t go funny, and listened to her tell whomever was in charge at St. Martin’s to order everyone out of the cathedral. She was bringing in a “specialist,” she explained. A definite upgrade from “probationer,” I thought—as short lived as that upgrade was going to be.

She hung up and disappeared into her bedroom. “What’s your plan?” she asked from beyond the closed door. I heard metal hangers screech and clothes landing on a bedspread.

“It depends on what kind of entity I’m dealing with,” I called back. That was the one thing I hadn’t been able to determine, and yeah, it mattered. Certain demons were susceptible to religious artifacts and scripture, which I was sort of counting on. There would be plenty of both at the church.

“So that message on the rector’s back,” Vega said. “ ‘Black Earth.’ You weren’t lying about not being able to connect it to anything?”

I thought about the fanatical cult in Central Park and started to open my mouth to reiterate what I’d said earlier—no connection—then stopped. An ice floe slid into my stomach. What if the message hadn’t been meant as a threat or a red herring, but as a warning?

“Christ,” I whispered.

“Croft?” she called when I didn’t answer.

“You interviewed everyone at St. Martin’s, right?”

“Yeah.” I could hear her questioning frown.

“All of them over at Police Plaza?”

“Yeah—” She stopped. “Well, all except one. Gave some weak excuse, but then got frantic when we pressed the issue. We ended up doing his interview at the cathedral, which was no biggie.”

I swallowed dryly. “Who?”

“Your buddy,” she replied. “Father Vick.”

The name horse-kicked me in the chest. For a moment, the apartment tilted. I clasped my cane in both hands, as though to anchor myself. But it made sense, didn’t it? The illness, the bleeding, and now this revelation of Father Vick’s unwillingness—or more likely, inability—to leave the cathedral.

The demon hadn’t reanimated the long-dead rector. The demon had found a new host.

Vega emerged in her professional attire, hair stretched back and banded off.

“Ready?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, Detective,” I said, then whispered a Word. The force from my cane shoved Vega into the corner of the living room. A second force straightened the scuff her shoes had made in the copper circle.

“Croft, what—!”

I closed the circle with a more powerful incantation. When Vega lunged forward, she rammed shoulder-first into an invisible force and rebounded. *What the fuck?* she mouthed, looking up and down the field that bent her image slightly. She slapped the field twice, then drew her pistol. The shots sounded like distant fireworks, flattened bullets falling to her feet.

“I’m really, really sorry,” I said so she could read my lips.

You son of a bitch, she mouthed, murder in her dark eyes. She drew her smartphone, but the circle’s energy had killed it.

Confident she’d be safe, I wheeled and jogged toward the door. The field was strong, but temporary. Two hours, tops. If the demon went down—no, *when* the demon went down, I amended—so would the phalanx of shriekers, who were bound to him. One more reason to not fail.

My gaze moved over the framed photos and scattered toys.

Actually, two reasons, when I considered a young boy would be without a mother.

I stopped at the kitchen to collect the keys Vega had dropped on the counter. Now it was a matter of seeing if what I had observed Meredith doing in the police cruiser would translate into my being able to drive the detective’s sedan. I could only imagine the knives Vega was staring into my back. Hopefully, she would forgive me when this was all over.

Two more shots sounded as I locked the door behind me.

Then again…

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The car's accelerator and power brakes took getting used to. I had put too much weight on both starting out. Fortunately, the roads were clear at this late hour and Vega's car was already banged up. By the time I skidded south onto Broadway, the Wall and the Financial District rising ahead, I had the driving thing down, more or less.

With a straight shot to my destination, I leaned toward the windshield to check out the sky. For the first time in almost a week, the low cloud ceiling was breaking up. The hovering moon it exposed was red, frightfully large, and—behind a foreground of moving clouds—appeared to be rising fast.

A distant shriek made my gorge rise. I swallowed against the cloying taste that still tainted my palate. Now two shrieks. Whether they were headed to Brooklyn or the cathedral, I couldn't tell. I started flipping switches on the dashboard until one flashed red and blue lights between the headlights. I picked up speed, blowing through the dozen or so intersections south of Canal Street.

At the checkpoint at Liberty, two blocks ahead, an armed guard moved into my path and held out an arm. A series of squat steel columns, meant to block vehicles, rose from the street behind him.

Crap, I hadn't seen those before.

I held my velocity steady at forty, blooping the siren, like I'd seen Vega do that morning. I was hoping the guard would understand this was a police emergency and lower the bollards. The alternative, stopping and allowing him to put that camera on my face, was a nonstarter. I'd be detained for sure, if not shot.

With a block to go, the guard thrust his palm forward twice, then raised his rifle to his shield sunglasses.

He could also shoot me before I even got there.

I powered my window down. But instead of slowing, I pressed the gas. The guard barked a halt command before the muzzle of his rifle began flashing. A hailstorm lit up the front of the sedan. Sparks flew and bits of bulletproof glass stung my face. I ducked until I was peering beneath the top of the steering wheel.

The guard moved to one side, and a second guard stepped in from the other, rifle blasting. Amid the growing storm, something thumped

deep in the engine, sending a jet of steam from the right seam of the hood.

I grabbed my cane from the passenger seat and aimed it out the window.

"Vigore!" I shouted.

The force threw the guards back, automatic fire bursting skyward. The car needle had jumped past seventy, and the bollards were fast approaching. I pointed the cane at the street, angling it behind the front axle.

Please, let this work, I thought.

I called power to my mental prism and, with the glaring lights of the checkpoint feet away, boomed, *"Forza dura!"*

The force that shook down my arm and into the cane emptied against the street. I was going for Newton's third law: for every action, an equal and opposite reaction. The reaction, in this case, was immediate. The front of the car vaulted up and angled to the right. Something slammed the undercarriage hard enough to rattle my spine —the tops of the bollards. When the same columns hit the back tires, the sedan was thrown onto its front fender.

My forehead cracked against the windshield, and my view of downtown Manhattan became asphalt and flying sparks. The car skidded on its nose for a good hundred feet, ever on the verge of upending, before slamming me hard into the seat, downtown Manhattan bouncing back into view. But the hailstorm had returned, this time lighting up the back of the car.

I steadied my shaken-up eyes on the street ahead and pressed the accelerator. Movement! Crippled, granted—and something large and metallic was dragging beneath the car—but a check of the rearview mirror showed the checkpoint falling away, the flashes of muzzles getting smaller.

I cranked the wheel right. The flattened tires thudded us behind a skyscraper and out of firing range. I slowed to get my bearings, then steered a stepwise route to reach the cathedral.

Humping the sedan over the curb, I aimed the one functioning headlight at the front of St. Martin's—and immediately saw my error. The bronze doors were closed and certainly locked. Worse, by having everyone cleared out, there was no one to invite me over the threshold. Assuming I could even force my way inside, my powers would be stripped to the bone and then some.

I hammered the steering wheel. "Idiot!"

I fought with the damaged car door, finally kicking it open. Red moonlight burned bright around me as I limped toward the cathedral. To my surprise, when I moved the police tape and pulled the right door, it swung outward. That was something, anyway. But now I had

the humming threshold to consider. It had been weakened, but if it was keeping a demon caged, it remained plenty strong.

"Hello?" I called into the darkness. Nothing moved beyond the closed glass doors inside.

I had some spell options, none great, but if that was what it was going to take…

"Everson Croft," someone called from behind me.

I stiffened at the voice. If it was Chicory, I was a dead man. I'd thrown around enough magic tonight to power Yankee Stadium. And that was to say nothing of having defied the Order's other mandate of staying off the cases. The fact I was standing at the cathedral threshold was proof enough of my disobedience. The Order would go straight to sentencing.

But the voice that had called my name was younger than Chicory's, more hollow-sounding. I turned. *Oh, hell.* Roughly a dozen young men in tailored suits and gelled hair were arrayed in the street in a semicircle, closing toward me. Vampire Arnaud's freaking blood slaves.

"You have something owed us," the foremost blood slave said. It was Zarko. Even in the dimness, I recognized his short monk's bangs. His jaundiced eyes dipped to Grandpa's ring.

"Look guys," I said, "now really isn't the time."

"Give it to us, and we will leave you in peace," Zarko said.

"How about just skipping to the leave me in peace part?"

One side of Zarko's mouth slid up as he stepped from street to sidewalk. I felt Arnaud's venomous presence. "We will take it one way or another," Zarko said. "And you do not appear in any shape to stop us."

I brought my fingers to where he was looking now. A wet gash smarted at my hairline, where my head had smacked the windshield. I looked past Zarko to the car's pock-marked glass. With the high adrenaline of the encounter at the Wall winding down, pain pulsed in every part of my body. I felt as banged up and broken down as Vega's poor sedan.

"Can't I set up a meeting with Arnaud to, you know…" A cold wind hit my sweat-soaked shirt and pants, shuddering out the rest of my sentence "…d-d-dis-cuss this."

Zarko and the rest of the blood slaves began to laugh. They had already seen my blood; now they heard my weakness. I was succumbing to shock. I aimed Grandpa's ring at them.

"Keep on g-giggling," I warned, fighting to hold my voice and fist steady.

Zarko hesitated for a half-step before striding on. "You haven't the strength to overwhelm us all," he—or more likely, Arnaud—decided.

“Even with your family trinket.”

He was right, of course. Though the ring was throbbing with the same urgency I’d felt in Arnaud’s office, I wouldn’t be able to channel the kind of juice needed to cripple this crew, much less destroy them.

Which meant it was time to bluff. “Care to test that theory?” I asked, forcing my lips into a puckish grin.

Before I saw him move, Zarko darted in, seized my throat, and lifted me. I choked on the crunch of cartilage and kicked weakly, tears springing from my surprised eyes. He hoisted me higher. I seized his ice-cold wrist in one hand and used the other to swing my cane at his head. But without leverage, I couldn’t land a solid blow. The contact mussed his hair—which was actually an improvement—but that was about it. Zarko didn’t even blink.

“The ring,” he said.

The other blood slaves pressed closer, but I noticed they kept a respectful distance from the threshold at my back. That respect wouldn’t necessarily hold up. They were at Arnaud’s command. The second he gave the word, they would be on top of me, fighting over my wings and drumsticks.

Meanwhile, my vision was doing strange things. I fought to focus down the length of Zarko’s arm to his waxy face.

“The ring,” he repeated, the lines of his mouth a growing blur.

A warm fog of sleep began to drift over my oxygen-deprived brain. But rather than seduce me, the sensation sent down an alarm. I hooked my cane over a thumb, extended the remaining fingers, and used my free hand to tug on the ring. It clamped down, as though refusing to be relinquished, but I refused to let up. With a final twist that nearly sloughed the skin away, I felt the ring release. I drew it from my finger and held it up for the blood slaves to see. I then threw my arm forward as hard as my throbbing shoulder would allow. Heads turned simultaneously and swiveled back to face me. I showed them my empty hand.

Zarko released his grip, and I collapsed to the pavement. Leaving me in a heap, the blood slaves spread out into a search. The towers above me spun as my breaths returned in bruised gasps. I rolled to my side and shook the ring from my sleeve back into my hand.

One of the first sleight-of-hand tricks Grandpa had taught me.

I swayed to my feet. I’d bought myself a little time, a little breathing room, but not enough for spell-casting. As the blood slaves searched the street, I began calling energy to my prism. I was spent but not empty.

I backed from the church threshold on shaky legs.

“He still has it,” Zarko announced.

Time’s up, I thought.

With the rapid patter of leather soles closing, I launched into a run and shouted, *“Penetrare!”* Light in the form of an arrow’s head took shape around my cane. Holding it in front of me, I stooped low, shoved with my right foot, and plunged head first into the roaring threshold.

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I didn't hurt. There was nothing *to* hurt. I was disembodied, detached. Anchored to no one and nothing. I drifted without sight, sensing darkness all around. The darkness seemed to shift like the black sands of a far-off shore—or the folds of the Grim Reaper's robes.

At that second image, I paused. *Wait a second…*

I'd been under no illusions my invocation would pierce the threshold—I had just needed the field to yield a little at the point of contact. I was even prepared for some god-awful pain. But straight to death? Seriously?

Son of a bitch.

So now what? Was there supposed to be a light or something?

At the thought, one appeared. But it wasn't the divine illumination I'd imagined. This light was pale yellow and fluttered like a candle's flame. It seemed to turn a corner before drifting toward me.

I blinked twice. I had eyelids, apparently. And a cheek, which was flattened to something hard and cold. I wasn't dead, just badly stunned. The effort to lift my head opened the storm gates of hell. I writhed around my gnashing teeth and gnarled cries, disembodied no more.

Oh crap oh crap oh crap oh crap…

It felt as though someone had flayed me open, pounded my insides to liquid, shoveled in hot coals, and then stitched me back up again, poorly. Death would have been a mercy. I stomped the floor and punched the air, as though to beat back the agony. Exhaustion eventually did the job.

I lay panting on my back as the pain slipped off by degrees and a coolness settled in.

I raised my head. Beyond my outstretched legs, energy hummed over the open doorway and night. No sign of Zarko and the blood slaves. They had either left me for dead, or Arnaud had recalled them to pursue me another day. Either way, he wasn't going to have them test a cathedral threshold. I only had a little demon-like energy in me; they carried it in spades.

I remembered the candle flame and turned back to the glass doors. The light was gone now, but I hadn't imagined it.

I found my cane and pressed myself to a knee. While I waited for the room to stop spinning, I performed a self check. I was crippled, bleeding, in shock, and stripped of all powers, save the small reserve holding Thelonious at bay. Otherwise, I was fine.

Standing all the way, I brought my face to the glass door. I could make out the cathedral's cavernous nave, rows of pews proceeding to the raised chancel. Above, the stained-glass faces of saints were being tinged red by the demon moon, as though possessed themselves.

The candle-bearer was gone, but I knew who it was. That Father Vick was still trapped inside was a good sign. It meant the demon hadn't carried out the sacrifice yet. But he'd seen me, I was sure.

There was no time to lose.

I tried the doors. Locked. The plate glass didn't look very thick. I stepped back and brought my heel forward with everything I had. The glass shattered to my knee, taking some more skin with it. Reaching a hand through the opening, I fumbled for the bolt, turned it, and stumbled inside.

Glass crackled under my soles as I got my footing and looked around. I staggered down the corridor to the interior courtyard, crossed the blood-red flagstones, and pushed open the door to Father Vick's apartment.

I flipped the light switch, but the power must have gone out. By the ambient moonlight, I could see he wasn't here. I took a leather-bound Latin Bible from Father Vick's desktop and then rifled the drawers of the desk until I found a silver crucifix. Turning to leave, my gaze fell to his white handkerchief. I lifted it from the object it had been draping and stumbled backwards at the sight of a nightmarish face.

My own, I quickly realized, staring back from the foggy glass of a scrying mirror. But the flame that fluttered up over my shoulder did not belong to me. Neither did the hooded head it illuminated.

My heart slammed as I spun, but it wasn't Father Vick I faced.

"What are you doing here?" Malachi asked.

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"No one's supposed to be in here," Malachi said in a cold monotone. The light from the candle swam in his watery gray eyes. His gaze was bolder than it had been that morning. I dropped my own gaze to his other hand, but it was hidden by the sleeve of his robe. A black robe, I noted.

"Where are they?" I demanded.

"Who?"

"Father Vick and the bishop?"

"Haven't you heard." He drew nearer. "They're missing."

His voice held its monotone as his narrow face fluttered in and out of the hood's shadow. I caught a whiff of sour breath. With the backs of my legs pressed to the desk, I was boxed in.

"Why didn't you evacuate with the others?" I asked, looking for his hidden hand again. He wasn't who I had expected to find, and there was something off about him. He seemed … haunted.

"I hid," he said, pressing nearer. "I needed to atone. I think I'm the cause of what happened."

"What you found in the archives," I said.

He stopped, his eyes seeming to sharpen in surprise.

"Bartholomew Higham, the fifth rector," I continued. "The Church believed he'd become demon possessed. They killed him, but didn't perform an exorcism, or didn't perform it correctly."

"Father Vick didn't seem to think it had been done right," Malachi said. "But Father Richard said to leave it alone. They argued terribly. And then—"

The flesh of Malachi's other hand hit the glow of the candle. I lunged forward, managing to catch his wrist. Even in my sorry state, I was able to drive Malachi back. We toppled over the corner of the bed and landed hard on the floor. The candle clattered off somewhere and went out.

"Help!" Malachi cried in the darkness, trying to pry my fingers away.

Teeth clamped around one of my knuckles, and I stifled a yell. I climbed my fingers to his hand. Empty. I proceeded to pat him down as best I could, which must have felt to the kicking, writhing acolyte

like a sloppy grope. Satisfied he wasn't holding anything dangerous, I used the bed's footboard to pull myself up. Malachi scooted back before stopping to regard my offered hand.

"Sorry," I said, breathing hard. "I thought you had a weapon. And with everything that's happened…"

He looked at my hand another moment, his hood fallen away from his long hair, and then let me help him to his feet. As he recovered the candle and relit it, I watched him closely, trying to make sense of his presence. In the light of the new flame, I saw what I had misinterpreted moments before.

It wasn't possession written on Malachi's face, but the dull lines of inebriation.

The atonement he'd mentioned apparently involved helping himself to the communion wine I smelled on his breath. The kid was one shade shy of blotto. And who could blame him? He believed he'd set in motion a chain of events that had led to Father Richard's murder and now the disappearances. I guessed that around the time I was crashing through the threshold, he was downing his fourth or fifth chalice of St. Martin's red. The light I'd seen was him coming to investigate the noise before ducking away. As someone who knew the cathedral better than most, he would have had plenty of hiding places to choose from.

Which meant he could help me.

"The place Higham stored the bones," I said. "Where is it?"

"The catacombs," Malachi answered. "But the entrance was closed off after Higham's execution. The site was decreed a sanctum of evil. I've already checked it out. There's a solid wall over the entrance."

"Show me," I said.

He picked up the urgency in my voice and nodded quickly. Cupping a hand around the flame, he wheeled toward the door. As I shambled after him and across the courtyard, I was afraid to look up. Afraid the demon moon had reached its zenith. Afraid I had lost Father Vick for good.

THE AIR SEEMED to thin as we hurried down a stone stairwell in the corner of the cathedral, but that was my phobia at being underground kicking in. The darkness wasn't helping. A nauseating blend of heat and cold prickled over my tightening chest. I began to wheeze.

Malachi turned his head. "Do you need to rest?"

I shook my head. As long as I could breathe, I had to keep moving. If the demon was the one I feared, we were dealing with a big-time baddie. He could not be allowed to escape, under any circumstances.

Underqualified or not, I was assigning myself the task of stopping him.

Which was infuriating when I thought about it. I'd risked my neck tracking leads, taking shots in the dark, getting shot *at*—not to mention fire-blasted and finger-cranked—to eventually connect the dots. With the monitoring spell Chicory had thumbed into my head, the Order should have had the same information as me. And yet, where in the hell were they?

It was the kind of critique I wanted to stuff into the Elders' flabby ears, but with the interference from the energy surrounding the church, I doubted even my thoughts were getting through.

I was truly on my own.

Fresh anxiety snuffed out my anger as the stairwell deposited us into a low-ceilinged basement. Malachi held up the candle. Light swelled through a suspension of dust and over storage trunks and mounds of covered furniture.

"It's in the back," he said.

I studied the stone floor as we walked. Its powdery surface was marred by prints. Some from the search team, no doubt, but perhaps not all of them. I raised my eyes to the far wall emerging from the darkness. I made out what had been an arched doorway, since filled in by uneven stone bricks and chunky mortar. The former entrance to the catacombs.

Malachi stood to one side. "See what I mean?"

I pressed both hands against the impeding wall, then tested the individual bricks. A metal ringlet, too dull to determine its age, had been bolted into one of the central bricks. I pushed and pulled on that, too. Nothing budged. I pressed an ear to the wall, but it was too dense to hear through.

"You think they're inside?" Malachi asked in alarm, catching on.

I nodded distractedly and searched my pockets. I still had Father Vick's card but without my wizarding power, I couldn't locate him. None of the other spell items were worth a squat, either.

My gaze roamed the floor in thought, until I noticed something: faint lines.

I asked for the candle and knelt. The lines were abrasions left by stone. I touched them and noted the grit on my finger. I stood again and moved the candle around the door frame. The texture of the mortar here and there told me what I'd begun to suspect. The bricks were secured to one another, but no longer to the frame of the doorway. Someone had chiseled out the mortar, then hidden his work. I searched around for a handhold, a place to pull.

"Here," Malachi said, tapping something.

Of course. The metal ringlet.

"There's some cord over there," he said, a step ahead of me again.

Where panic was making a confusion of my own thoughts, inebriation seemed to have cooled and steadied his.

Malachi ran to an old piano, its closed lid secured with twine, and began to unknot it. I set down the Bible and cross, standing the candle on the ground beside them. The length of twine Malachi returned with looked sturdy enough, but I doubled it over before threading it through the ring. I passed the folded-over end to Malachi and took the loose strands in my own hands. We backed from the door at an angle until the cord was taut and even.

"Ready?" I asked.

He nodded, and we began to pull. Our strength was well short of demonic, but working together, pained grunts bouncing off the basement walls, we managed to walk the door out a few inches. I handed my end of the twine to Malachi and wedged my cane into the narrow space. With him pulling and me prying, we created an opening that looked large enough to edge through.

I held the candle inside and groaned. Rough-cut stairs spiraled down into more darkness.

"Want me to carry these?" Malachi asked, stooping for the Bible and cross.

"Hand them to me once I'm through. You've got another candle, right?" I'd encountered one during my pat-down of him. "Good. Use it to see your way back up, then get as far from the cathedral as you can."

"But I—"

"Forget it," I interrupted. "You have no idea what's down there."

I peeked through the opening once more. If I failed, which felt almost certain, I didn't want Malachi to be in the path of an emerging demon lord. The apocalypse that followed would likely consume him along with the rest of the city, true, but I was still holding out hope that the Order would get their heads out of their collective asses before that happened.

"Where should I go?" he asked.

I fished through my pockets until I found Detective Vega's card. "Call this number. Someone named Hoffman will probably answer. Tell him you got left here, and he'll send someone to pick you up."

He nodded as he accepted the card, emotion trembling through him for the first time. I slid my cane inside my belt and squeezed through the opening. The effort left me dizzy. Malachi passed me the Bible and silver cross. I took them and then touched the flame from my candle to the wick of his.

As the light suffused his young face, I saw in his eyes something I recognized. "Listen to me," I said. "Passion led you to uncover those things in the archives, not sin. You've no fault in this."

The words seemed to fortify a layer of my prism. Maybe because they were words I would have liked to have been told ten years ago. Instead, the Order black-marked me. I didn't want Malachi shouldering the same guilt.

He nodded and wiped his watery eyes with the back of a hand. "Please help them."

"I'll do everything I can. Now go."

I turned from his diminishing scuffs and peered down the steps. *Better to perish in conviction than live in cowardice, right?* I felt too queasy to answer. Drawing a diver's breath, I started down.

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The spiral staircase ended at a cave-like corridor that diminished into darkness. I struggled to control my gasping breaths so I could listen. Easier said than done. The pressure in my chest wasn't just my anxiety talking now. The air was heavier than in the basement, from being shut away for so long, no doubt—but an oppressive evil lived here as well.

Noises began to take shape. Things skittering here and there, and farther away, what sounded like speech, low and garbled.

It wasn't human.

"You wanted to join the big leagues, Everson?" I whispered over a tremulous breath. "Batter up."

I raised the candle and proceeded down the corridor. Within several paces, I saw what the corridor really was—an ossuary for the remains Reverend Higham had piled down here. They sloped toward the floor in great drifts: dusty-brown arm and leg bones, tossed-off pelvises, sections of vertebrae. And skulls. Everywhere. No matter where I looked, a host of them stared back with ghastly sockets and withered teeth.

My heart slammed harder. As decent as these people may have been in life, I wasn't ready to join their ranks. Especially not when a shiny red centipede slid from one of their ear canals.

Ahead, the corridor bent around a corner, and the speech I'd heard earlier picked up again. The words were nonsensical, guttural grunts in a language I'd never heard or read. And they warped the atmosphere, twisting up my guts and making my eardrums ache. Though I couldn't interpret them, it was clear the incanted words were intended to gather power.

I stopped to make sure I had everything I needed: religious text, silver cross, holy water, cane. Four checks, even though the last wasn't much good in my weakened state. I would attempt the exorcism alone if I had to, though I was counting on Father Vick's help. Assuming enough of him remained.

Where the corridor ended, I peered around the corner. The candle light swelled into a large grotto, revealing the missing church officials.

The bishop was a woman, I saw. She lay supine on the floor, gray

hair piled under her head, back arching in spasmodic thrusts. Her closed eyes suggested she was either unconscious or entranced. The black-robed figure standing over her swayed with his back to me, those awful sounds emanating from his bowed head. He'd been incanting in the dark this whole time, which felt freaky as shit.

I swallowed hard on a knot of fear and grief. Man, I had wanted so badly to be wrong.

"Father Vick?" I called into the echoing space.

If he heard me, he gave no sign. His robe continued to shudder with his guttural chants. Steeling my nerves, I stepped into the grotto. Off to one side were the blue bits of protective clothing Vega and I had donned and the demon had used to guide his shriekers. They would be at the detective's apartment by now.

I reached up with a shaking hand and inserted the candle into the eye socket of a dome-gazing skull. The swelling light revealed an elaborate bone pattern over the floor, one I recognized. The grotto had been made into a demonic casting circle, the convulsing bishop at its center.

The demon was preparing an alchemy spell, taking the potent faith of the bishop and warping it into a black wrath that would empower him and enable his escape from the cathedral's weakening hold.

"I know you're in there, Father," I said to his back. I reached into my right jacket pocket and loosened the screw-on cap to the bottle of holy water. "I know you can hear me. The night the demon murdered the rector, you wrote the message on Father Richard's back. You couldn't name the demon. He wouldn't let you. So you did the next best thing. You named a druid group, Black Earth, whose beliefs revolve around the imminent return of Sathanas, demon lord of Wrath." The esoteric Latin had likely come from an old prayer book. "You were trying to warn us."

The garbled incanting rose in pitch and urgency. I could feel Sathanas's rage now, could feel how badly he wanted to tear me apart. But to turn from the spell would be to sever his connection to the bishop.

I followed the dark, twisting umbilicus of energy from the demon's head down to the aging woman's heart. I would have to be careful. At this stage, any violent disruption—such as driving my sword through the demon or dousing him in holy water—could kill her.

I needed Father Vick to work against Sathanas. And to do that, I needed to call him forth. Problem was, Father Vick's hold, which had already begun to fail during the daytime, would be all but absent after dark. Demons ruled the night. And with a demon moon nearing its zenith?

But Father Vick had wrested back enough control once to leave the

“Black Earth” message. I hoped that walking him through what had happened would spur him to rebel again.

“Yes, you’re possessed, Father,” I said. “The fifth rector of St. Martin’s took in the remains of thousands, to enrich himself, but he succumbed to the demon Sathanas in the process. The Church executed the rector and performed an exorcism. Malachi found the account in the archives and shared it with you and Father Richard. You weren’t convinced the exorcism had been done properly, though. You may even have sensed a shadow around his tomb. When Father Richard forbade you from performing a second exorcism, you attempted the rites at night, in secret.”

I thought about the robed figure Effie’s ghost friend had seen muttering around Reverend Higham’s tomb. I was sure now that had been Father Vick. And that had been his mistake—attempting the exorcism at night.

“The demon was more powerful than you anticipated,” I continued. “He overcame you and put you under his control. He had you retrieve Higham’s scrying mirror from the heritage room so he could contact those you sensed dabbled in magic.” It was the same mirror Father Vick had kept covered with the handkerchief. A mirror that would have shown the image of Reverend Higham to those on the receiving end. “Clifford, Chin, Flash, the others,” I said. “Sathanas dictated to them the spells to summon the shriekers. The night the demon contacted Clifford, Father Richard must have seen a light on in your room or overheard you. Not understanding your possessed state, he chastised you for practicing magic. In wrathful response, Sathanas followed Father Richard to the sacristy and murdered him.”

He’d also had Father Vick leak the murder to the press later.

Sathanas’s breaths gurgled in Father Vick’s throat. Was the struggle beginning?

“I can only imagine your horror,” I said. “But you *fought*, Father. You named a demon who didn’t want to be named. And as long as there’s any will left in there, you have to fight again.”

“Go away,” the figure garbled in an inhuman voice.

Sathanas? Father Vick? I couldn’t tell.

“Father, listen to me—”

With a final eruption of words, something appeared above his head. A dagger. He was going to finish the spell by driving it into the bishop’s heart, releasing the last of her energy. I dropped everything and scrambled forward. With bones rolling underfoot, it felt as though I was running in a dream. But the space separating us collapsed, and my lowered shoulder struck his ribs in the back. His incantation broke off in a wet roar that shook the grotto.

I wrapped my aching arms around his waist and continued to drive

with my legs. He was larger than Malachi, more solidly built, but I managed to topple him. We crashed down into the bones that edged the casting circle.

When he rotated his head, I delivered a bone-crunching right to his jaw.

He fell limp, the dagger tumbling from his outstretched hands. I turned quickly to the bishop. She'd fallen into quiet repose, but I couldn't tell whether she was breathing or not. In either case, I could no longer sense the warping energies of the spell. What that meant, I wasn't sure.

"Father Vick," I whispered, shaking his shoulder.

He stirred, and I helped him onto his back. When his face rotated into the candlelight, I recoiled in horror. In addition to his ears and nose, blood had been pouring from his eyes. He hadn't just been fighting to maintain the faith of the cathedral these past days. Father Vick had been fighting to maintain himself. How he'd lasted this long, I had no idea.

"Everson?" he mumbled. He blinked, then stared in a way that told me he couldn't see through the red skein that coated his eyeballs and gummed up lashes.

"It's me, Father," I said. "But we have work to do." I left him to retrieve the holy items I'd dropped. When I returned, I arranged them quickly beside him. Remembering I'd loosened the cap to the holy water, I pulled the bottle from my jacket pocket, relieved to find only a little of the water had dribbled out.

Father Vick pawed for me. "Are you still here?"

"Yes." I clasped the back of his hand and squeezed it. "You're under the possession of a demon lord, Father. We need to exorcise him. I have all the implements here. Tell me what to do, what to read. Quickly."

His eyes winced in agony, then seemed to fix on mine. "I'm so sorry, Everson," he whispered. "I wasn't deceiving you when we spoke. I just … I didn't know the things I was doing…"

"*Sathanas* was doing," I corrected him. "But you're back now, and I have your Bible. We can drive him out."

After another wince, he nodded heavily. "Yes, yes … all right." Father Vick sounded ripped up inside, but more like himself, the awful garbling gone from his voice. "Begin with the prayer."

I flipped open the Latin Bible to the section he indicated and began to read. *"Exorcizo te, omnis spiritus immunde, in nomine Dei Patris omnipotentis…"*

As I moved the silver cross over Father Vick's chest, a part of me felt like a fraud. I wasn't ordained. I hadn't even attended a Mass in ten years—during which time I managed to contract an incubus spirit

and challenge a core belief on which St. Martin's was based. But I shut that all away and focused on the power of the words, driving them into Father Vick. I concluded the opening prayer, making the sign of the cross twice more.

Father Vick's next wince turned into a grunting cry. His head whiplashed back, bloody teeth bared. But for the first time, hope stirred inside me. It wasn't pretty, but the exorcism seemed to be working.

"C'mon, Father," I whispered as I checked the next steps. "Hang in there."

I opened the bottle of holy water and wet the first two fingers of my right hand. I touched the moist pads to his right ear and then his left, saying, "*Ephpheta, quod est, Adaperire.*"

Steam hissed up, and Father Vick released another cry. I was reaching for his lips when my hand hesitated. Had he just cried … or laughed? The sound hardened and took on a cruel rhythm, until there was no longer any doubt. I backed onto my haunches, ice water breaking through me.

"Father Vick?" I asked.

His grinning face shot up like a Jack-in-the-box, but it was no longer his. The smile was too large, too mocking. His irises had blackened and spread, taking on fierce glints of red. And the skin between his brows was fissuring, as though someone had laid into it with an axe.

"Fight him, Father," I urged, splashing him with holy water. "Fight, dammit!"

The wet laughter became riotous as, with blood streaming down his face, the demon rose to his full height. I stumbled backwards, the holy items falling from me. Though I couldn't see it, I could hear the water glugging from the tipped-over bottle. I imagined it seeping through layers of bones, lost.

"Stupid wizard," Sathanas taunted in that awful voice. "You cannot banish a demon lord."

I watched as his robe began to shift and jut out in places, as though something were emerging from Father Vick's body. Something was, I realized in horror: the massive form of the demon. The fissure growing along his forehead broke through his nose in a crackling burst and then split his grinning lips. *Oh God, Father.* His ears sloughed off next. When horns erupted through his red-bearded cheeks, the little strength in my legs gave out, and I collapsed to the floor.

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The last vestiges of Father Vick dropped away, and a demon lord crouched inside the grotto, horrid wings scraping the walls. Horns studded his face, including two black blades that erupted from his temples like a Brahma bull's. A clawed hand tore away the remains of the robe, revealing a grotesque fusion of muscles and exoskeleton. At the demon's back, a barbed tail raked the bones.

I struggled to see the being analytically, even as I began shoving myself away. Demon lords were elementals, expressions of our darkest emotions and urges. No pure embodiments of the elemental virtues remained to oppose them—only the lineage of Saint Michael. Me, in other words. And right now I was about as dangerous to this thing as a chewed-up sock.

Sathanas's laughter died off. "Alone," he rumbled. 'The poor wizard is all alone."

I eyed the bishop, who had begun to stir. Had the demon pulled enough power from her to break the cathedral's threshold? The million dollar question. If I managed to escape with the bishop while the demon remained entrapped, I could alert the Order, bring in Elder-level magic.

Assuming they listen, I thought.

Sathanas's fiery red eyes tracked mine. Bones crunched under his hoofed foot as he stepped over the bishop, separating us.

"Alone," he repeated. "All alone. How does that make you feel, wizard?"

His words penetrated my mind, cracking like flint against my resentment toward the Order. Dark sparks kicked up inside me.

"Yes, angry," Sathanas said, hungrily. "And rightfully so. You have been threatened, dragged over jagged stones, abandoned like a pathetic pup. And by the same ones you have so dutifully served."

I struggled to suppress my crackling rage.

"And what about those who prattle of cultivating knowledge, delivering justice, and yet who gleefully deny you both?"

He was speaking of Midtown College now, the NYPD. Despite my efforts, the sparks inside me swelled and broke into flames. I watched them climb the administration wing of the college, the walls of One

Police Plaza. And as the flames blackened the institutions and pulled them down, an ecstatic energy beat in time with my heart. I was becoming the powerful wizard I knew myself to be. Before I could recoil from the dark fantasy, Sathanas spoke again.

"And this holy place," he sneered. "You know what they did to your forebears. Rounding them up like animals. Beheading them. Burning them at the stake while they screamed for mercy."

Fresh images of the Inquisition slashed through my mind's eye, too horrible to watch, too horrible to look away. I witnessed a woman I knew to be a direct ancestor pursued and hacked to death, her head paraded on a pike. Fury roared through me, searing my injuries closed, shaking hot tears from my eyes.

"Make no mistake, they hate you, wizard. *Hate* you. They will come for you again." I didn't recoil as Sathanas extended a grotesque hand toward me, horned wings looming above. "I feel your power," he said as he pulled me to my feet. "But it can be so much more, wizard, if you would only claim it."

Ugly or not, Sathanas was speaking to emotions that had been swirling inside me like combustible fuel. I was sick and tired of being marginalized and threatened. Take the Order, a bureaucracy with a God complex. Everything I had learned since my earliest training had come from my own initiative, not the Order. They hadn't assigned me a mentor in Chicory, but a goddamned warden. Now the Order was threatening me with death, and for what? Being a wizard? Why should I feel any allegiance to them? Why shouldn't I seek power elsewhere? To defend myself—and, if it came to it one day, to overthrow the Elders?

"Yes," Sathanas hissed, "you know it to be true."

Whoa, Skywalker, I thought from a distance. *This is a demon talking, a master manipulator. And you're letting him inside your head.*

I took a step back, but Sathanas quickly closed the space, his nightmare face bowing low. "There is no sin in passion," he insisted, his eyes like stoked coals. "No sin in righteous anger. I will teach you to cultivate it, bring it to its glorious expression. You have no idea the power, wizard. All who once stepped on you will come to cower at your feet."

Over the years, I had resorted to wisecracks and self-deprecating humor to deflect my anger. But the anger felt so much richer. So much more … *redemptive*. I ached now to punish those who had wronged me, even if it meant destroying them. I burned for them to know my terrifying power. A malicious smile broke across my face. Yes, *that* was true redemption.

And yet…

"What do you get from the deal?"

“What do you mean, wizard?” Sathanas demanded.

The flames inside me began to thin, as though reason were pulling oxygen from them. “A demon does not give selflessly,” I said, my voice strengthening. “There’s something you want.”

Huge black knuckles cracked inside the clenching fist he held out. “Like you, wizard,” he boomed, “I wish to exist according to my nature.” Fire breathed inside him. His body turned an incandescent red, and smoke plumed from his horrid wings. “I wish to be free.”

That’s all? I thought dryly, the anger guttering lower, the fire it had stoked leaving me. Mortal pains broke throughout my body, and I staggered against my cane.

But why is Sathanas appealing to me?

My gaze slid from the demon to the bishop, who remained down. Her faith, twisted from her, had given the demon form. But because I had ended the ceremony prematurely, he must not have acquired the power to break his confinement. He needed fresh fuel. He was trying to stoke my wrath into a force he could command. He would use it to free himself, then he would destroy me.

Unless I used that wrath to destroy him first.

I met his blistering gaze.

“Tell me more,” I said.

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I listened as Sathanas stormed above me, recounting the times I had been slighted, shoved aside, stepped on. I opened myself to the dark, manipulative fingers writhing through my mind, twisting my thoughts. I nodded at the rush of charges and insinuations he leveled—some against those I loved. I allowed the flames of indignation to rear up again, to roar through my compassion, my reason.

And with the frothing wrath came power. God, the power. It didn't require a mental prism to channel. It was already raging inside me. The demon Sathanas hadn't lied about that.

But amid the exhilaration, I clung like sin to a single mantra:

He'll use you and then kill you. He'll use you and then kill you. He'll use—

"Drink in the power, wizard," he said. "Let it become you."

At the potent suggestion, something withered to ash inside me. The last of my will. Flames gushed into the space, and I lost the mantra. A beautiful weightlessness overcame me. I was levitating, phantom fire roaring around my flapping coat. I'd read of magic users becoming demigods, but holy hell. Why would someone *not* elect this power, already latent inside him?

Sathanas cackled in delight as he poked a single talon against my shoulder, rotating me until I was facing away from the grotto. "Now, train your vengeance on those who wronged you."

Their faces flashed through my mind's eye—Professor Snodgrass, Detective Vega, Chicory, others from my past—and yes, I hated them all. I drew my sword and staff apart. The steel blade glowed red hot, orange flames licking up and down its length. I would break from the cathedral, climb into the red-lit night like a glorious archangel, and rain hellfire on my enemies.

But there was something I was supposed to remember.

"Go now," Sathanas said. "Break the hold of this wicked, wretched place."

I flew forward several feet, then wheeled with a thundering *"FUOCO!"*

The forces that roared down my sword and staff were more concentrated than anything I'd ever commanded. Like jet fuel, they

merged into a single column of fire that broke against Sathanas's chest. In blissful release, I watched him blast across the grotto. Flames plumed as Sathanas's form drove into the rear wall, bones and skulls erupting around him.

When the catacombs fell still again, Sathanas was buried, save for a black flap of wing and his serpentine tail, which lay limp beside the bishop. My wrath spent, I fell to the grotto floor, weary smoke rising from me. But I couldn't rest. I sheathed my sword and crawled to the bishop's side.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "Can you walk?"

She looked from the demon's tail back to me, her face creased with fear. "I believe so."

I helped her up, wrapping an arm around her waist, even though I wasn't in much better shape. Her first few steps were uncertain, but by the time we reached the grotto entrance, she was walking under her own power. By some miracle, the candle in the skull's socket had remained lit, and I removed it and handed it to her.

"You lead," I said. "I'll watch our rear."

I followed her from the grotto. As we turned the corner, I saw that Sathanas's impact had jarred the bones from the corridor walls such that we were facing larger drifts than when I'd arrived. With her short stature, the bishop had to crawl over the first pile. I peered nervously over a shoulder.

"Father Victor brought me down to the basement," she said in a gravely voice, "allegedly to show me something. Then he pressed a cloth over my nose and mouth. Chloroform, I suspect."

"That wasn't Father Victor," I said as I helped her over the next drift. "In trying to exorcise a malevolent presence from these grounds, he became possessed. It wasn't his fault. He didn't know what he was facing. The creature back there is an ancient demon lord. He murdered Father Richard and was preparing to do the same to you. Were it not for the will that remained in Father Victor, the demon would have succeeded and escaped. So please, remember him in that way."

As had happened with my parting words to Malachi, another layer of my prism seemed to harden. More of my magic-born power returned.

"And who are you?" the bishop asked.

I thought for a moment. "Father Vick was a teacher and friend."

We were halfway to the staircase when the catacombs began to shake again. A roar erupted from the grotto. Even as I tried to speed our pace, the bishop peered behind us, eyes huge.

"Wizard," Sathanas's voice boomed.

"Go," I told her. "Those stairs lead to the basement. Climb them

and get out of the cathedral. Then put all of the faith you have into the sanctity of this place. It will prevent him from escaping."

"What are you going to do?"

I drew my cane apart and called light to my staff. "Delay him."

A hand, strong and maternal, pressed between my shoulder blades. "I've never met you," she said, "but I recognize you now, Everson. Father Victor spoke of you. He praised your benevolence. He said you would become a powerful ally one day, and he was right."

Her warmth and words undermined my fear. For a moment, I glimpsed Father Vick beside us, a white robe swimming around him. When I turned to look, though, the illusion vanished, and there was only a mound of skeletal remains.

"Stupid wizard," Sathanas boomed over his growing footfalls.

The warmth between my shoulder blades swelled with a gentle pressure that lingered even as I heard the bishop climbing away behind me. Cinching my grip on sword and staff, I stepped forward.

"I hear you, demon," I said.

With any luck, my blast had weakened him. I couldn't destroy him, but with the power I now possessed, I could offer a large enough speed bump for the bishop to escape. The demon would have nothing to draw on following my death. He would remain trapped. What happened next would be up to the Order, but hopefully I'd stirred up enough dust to get their attention.

When Sathanas rounded the corner, I staggered back. What I'd just said about him being weakened? Forget it. He was larger than ever, his horned and ripped physique radiating fiery power. He stooped into the corridor, bones smoking to black dust around him.

"Yes," Sathanas said. "I saw into your feeble mind. I turned your wrath into mine."

Feeble, indeed. Believing you could outwit a demon was like believing you could best the guy on the subway platform at three-card Monte. Sathanas had laid a trap inside of a trap. First by manipulating my wrath, then by getting me to believe the power of that wrath could harm him. Instead, he absorbed it. Now he commanded the strength to break the cathedral's hold.

And I was all that stood in his way.

"Stop," I shouted, setting my spent legs apart, sword and staff held out.

Sathanas stormed closer. "Do you wish to make me stronger still?"

Before I realized he'd thrashed it, his tail was driving toward me. I grunted out a *"Protezione,"* but my summoned shield shattered before the barbed tail. The hooked tip, diving for my heart, sunk beneath my left clavicle instead. With a sick crunch, it punched out my upper back.

I screamed, hands wringing my sword and staff, forearms hugging the tail.

Sathanas laughed as his tail lifted me from my feet and slammed me into the corridor wall. Remains tumbled around me as the pain cast me into a gray world between excruciating waking and bone-aching sleep. From far away came the piercing cries of shriekers.

"Do your hear that?" he asked. "My legion is circling."

With another lash, he slammed me into the opposite wall.

"Soon, your world will belong to me."

Into another wall I went, the corridor flickering in and out.

Sathanas curled his tail around until I was struggling to hold his looming horned face in focus. "You will be gone in a moment, wizard. But be reassured, when I emerge into the world, it will be known that Everson Croft freed me. What power you lacked in your pathetic life, I will grant you in death. A demon may not give selflessly, but he gives."

In my hazy state, I could see the ley energy coursing up around us, warping the air. Any attempt to channel it would be suicide. The flow was too pure for me, too potent. It would blow my prism before destroying my mind. But if I wanted to slow Sathanas, it was the only option left.

Anyway, I thought with a wince, *I'm already toast.*

But first I needed to forgive all those I had sworn vengeance and death upon. Detective Vega, Chicory, the Church, even Professor Snodgrass. I would never wish on them what would befall humanity with Sathanas's escape.

I also thought of my friend and fellow professor, Caroline Reid. A woman who, I could freely admit now, I was kind of, sort of in love with. If I somehow managed to get out of this, I would tell her. But whatever happened, I hoped Caroline would have some sense that I tried. That I never gave up.

That determined, a pervasive calm settled over me. It was time.

"Hey, Sathanas," I mumbled, holding his blazing eyes, "Take your gift…"

I drove my sword arm forward and watched the blade plunge into the demon's throat.

"…and choke on it."

I threw open my prism to the torrent of ley energy. It smashed through me, white and raging, like dam waters. I strained with all I had to contain it, to channel it into the demon, whose angry eyes flared wide. But my prism was breaking up like a paper straw. I didn't know how much longer—

Silence hit me.

I was a young boy again, sitting in the middle row of pews, looking

on the great stained glass window. My gaze had come to a stop at Michael. He was depicted as an angel, but I knew that wasn't quite right. He had been an elemental, a First Saint. Someone occupied the seat beside me, but not my grandmother. I tried to turn my head, but I was *in* the stained glass now, light pouring through me.

Sathanas's horrid scream wrenched me back to the present. Or maybe that was my own cry, the final expression of a blown mind, because I felt myself crashing into a blackness of collapsing bones.

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I woke up to a cliché, which was to say in a hospital room. I did blink around, but no confused murmurings leaked from my lips. The antiseptic smell, sounds of distant monitors, and blue curtain that encircled my raised bed cued me in immediately.

I looked down to the right, where a pair of IV tubes fed blood and saline into the crook of my arm. On my left side, thick padding hugged my chest and shoulder, a spot of red striking through its center.

I remembered Sathanas's tail piercing me and struggled to sit up, but something restrained my left wrist. I pulled the cover away. I was handcuffed to the bedrail.

"Do you know the punishment for imprisoning a cop?"

Someone stood from a chair beside the head of my bed. A second later, Detective Vega stepped into view. I looked her up and down. Same serious face, pulled-back hair, and black suit as just about every time I'd ever seen her, but man did she look stunning. Maybe it was just the fact she was alive.

"You're all right," was all I could think to say.

"Are you?" she asked.

Except for a little pounding in the back of my head, I wasn't in nearly as much pain as I should have been, considering. "Just foggy," I said. "How in the hell did I end up here?"

A corner of her mouth smirked. "Your buddies brought you in."

"Buddies?"

"Dempsey and Dipinski. The acolyte at the cathedral called my office late last night and spoke to Hoffman. When Dempsey and Dipinski arrived to pick the kid up—in a taxi, for some reason—the whole cathedral shook. Like a bomb had gone off, they said. This kid, Malachi, insisted on going back inside for you. They dug you out of a boneyard in the subbasement. Boy, the officers just loved that."

"And the…?" I almost said demon, but stopped myself. That Detective Vega was alive—that *I* was alive—told me all I needed to know. Somehow, someway, Sathanas had been destroyed.

My body relaxed into the mattress.

"Do you want to tell me more about my visitors last night?" Vega

asked. “Or should we save it for another time?”

“Definitely another time,” I said wearily. “But you were … protected?”

She looked at me a long moment before nodding. “Around the same time the cathedral would’ve been shaking, those screaming creatures fell apart, evaporated. And then that field, or whatever you put up, disappeared.”

“And your son?”

“Safe as can be.”

I nodded at her softening expression. The dissolution of the shriekers occurred when their source, Sathanas, was destroyed. The subsequent breakdown of the shield was me tumbling into la-la land—and under a pile of bones, apparently. I remembered the centipede I’d seen crawling out of the ear canal of one of those skulls and fought the urge now to check my own.

Vega lowered her voice. “So what happened down there, Croft?”

I thought back to the experience of becoming Michael in the stained glass window. In that final instant, the power of the cathedral and my magical bloodline had aligned. And it was all because…

“I forgave,” I said.

“Forgave?” Her face scrunched up. “Who?”

“Um…” I looked down. “A few people. But I had help, too.”

“There was someone with you?”

“Yeah. Father Vick.”

His had been the presence beside me on the pew. I was certain of that now. Like strong hands over the backs of mine, he had helped me hold the prism together long enough to destroy the demon. Without him, I was sure I would have perished instead. And Sathanas would be loose in the world. I took a moment to compose my face before raising it again.

I expected Vega to say something skeptical—she had that look in her eyes—but she sighed in what sounded like accession. “The bishop told me what happened. Father Vick … the demon … how you saved her butt.”

“Then what’s with the handcuffs?” I gave them a little rattle.

Vega snorted and shook her head. “You woke up a few hours ago and tried to dance a tango with the night nurse.” She separated a small key from the others on her chain as she circled the bed. “The cuffs were put on for her sake as much as yours. She wasn’t amused.”

Thelonious, I thought with an inward groan. At least it settled the question of whether I owed him a night out.

I watched Vega unlock the cuffs, conflict furrowing her brow. I didn’t need to read her mind to know what was going on upstairs. She was considering just how in the hell she was going to explain to her

higher ups what had happened at the cathedral. I didn't envy her.

"You were right," I said.

She looked up, eyes bright with surprise. "About what?"

"The evidence leading you to Father Vick. I don't blame you for that. Two very different approaches led us to the same person, though for different reasons. When you write up your report, I hope you'll consider that."

The last thing I wanted was for Father Vick to be vilified, especially after having made the ultimate sacrifice. I doubted Vega would be given a choice, though. But as she pocketed the cuffs in her jacket, she looked as if she was debating whether or not to tell me something. She stepped back, establishing a professional distance.

"I've put in a request," she said at last, "to get first crack at these kinds of cases in the future. Crimes that don't fit the typical pattern, that sort of thing." She hesitated. "I could use a … specialist."

"Well, that all depends on what you're offering, Detective," I said with a smirk.

She folded her arms. "How about not citing you for trashing my vehicle?"

Heh. I'd forgotten about that.

"No, look, I'd be honored," I said, as her face relaxed into an almost-smile. "I'm just not sure what kind of a future I have in the city." *Or whether I have a future, period*. I glanced down at my left wrist, finding a hospital band instead of a watch. "What time is it?"

Vega consulted her own wrist. "Quarter till eleven."

"Monday morning?"

"Yeah, why?"

I drew the IV tubes from my arm, lowered the right bedrail, swung my legs over the bedside, and stood.

"Croft," Vega whispered. *"What in the hell are you doing?"*

I steadied myself, not nearly as weak or sore as I had expected, then realized with a flush my gown was wide open in back. No wonder Vega had thrown a forearm to her wincing face. "I'm, ah…" I said, holding the flaps closed behind me with one hand and batting past the curtain with the other in search of my clothes and personals. "I'm late for something."

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The hearing was already underway when I arrived at the conference room at Midtown College. The distinguished faces of the board members turned at my entrance. And then there was Professor Snodgrass, who I had apparently caught in the middle of his presentation.

He cleared his throat and peered over his little oval glasses. “How nice of you to join us, Mr. Croft. Wardrobe problems?” He gave a self-satisfied sniff. “Well, go on, have a seat.”

I looked down at my bandaged shins poking beneath the hem of my coat. With my clothes blood-stained and filthy, I’d donned a second gown on my back instead, then buttoned my punctured coat to the throat. At least it wasn’t inside out.

Grunting, I took the empty seat at the end of the table, hanging my cane over the armrest. In my peripheral vision, I noticed several faculty members seated around the edge of the room. I felt like I’d walked into a trial.

“As I was saying,” Snodgrass continued, with a final glance of reproach my way, “Mr. Croft’s criminal status, coupled with his failure to disclose said status to you, the esteemed board, is more than sufficient, I should think, to have him terminated from the college and forbidden from teaching or conducting research here ever again. I urge you to also consider that since the college renewed his contract under the false impression Mr. Croft had a clean record, he be fined the equivalent of his salary going back to his arrest date.”

Ouch. That would definitely land me in a cardboard box beneath the underpass. I watched the board members flip through the stapled packets in front of them—copies of my arrest record and court papers—and tried to read their expressions. That all eight were frowning wasn’t encouraging.

“May I say something?” I asked, raising a hand half way.

I wasn’t going to try to convince the board of anything. My plan was to give a brief account of the events that had led to my arrest, leaving out the magical parts, of course, admit fault for not informing the board, and then ask that they consider probation instead of termination. I would even accept a pay cut. If they terminated me

anyway, I had tried. I think Caroline would look on that at least somewhat kindly.

When my gaze returned to Snodgrass, I remembered my other reason for racing over here in a pair of hospital gowns. I had forgiven him last night, sure, but it didn't mean I was going to allow the twerp the last word.

Snodgrass met my gaze with a haughty *this should be good* look.

"If I can say something first," a voice intervened. I turned to Chairman Cowper, a bald man with large, sagging lips that smacked every few words. The chairman of the board directed his smacking lips to Snodgrass. "For all of our sakes, I wish you would have been a little more thorough."

Snodgrass blinked rapidly. "More thorough, sir?" he asked. "I'm not sure I understand. It's all in the—"

"A follow-up phone call at the least," Chairman Cowper continued. "When I spoke to the detective of record this morning, she said that Professor Croft here…" He smacked again as he opened a hand toward me. "…has no criminal history. His arrest was in error, and it is all being taken care of, per the detective's own words. She admitted that it should have been expunged a long time ago, but the court system being in its present state…"

I suppressed a smile. *Detective Vega, you little lynx.*

Professor Snodgrass's lips began to twitch between his reddening cheeks, but the chairman showed his palm. "Your motion that he be terminated, Professor, is based on the assertion that he is on probation. Well, that is hardly the case, now is it? Some due diligence would have established this. And spared us all the toil of yet another pointless meeting," he added in a mutter.

"I spoke with the detective just the other week!" Snodgrass exclaimed.

But Cowper had already started to stand, the other board members joining him.

"And what about his class size?" Snodgrass continued, arms pumping. "Six students!" His titter verged on hysterical. "And his grants? We haven't seen any of those lately!"

"Oh, that reminds me." At the door, Chairman Cowper turned his head. "Just this morning, the college received its largest grant to date —double the amount, in fact, that Professor Croft requested." He nodded at me, appreciation gleaming in his eyes. "It seems someone is very taken with your work."

"A grant from who!" Snodgrass demanded.

"*Whom*," the chairman corrected him, then smacked his lips in recall. "Ah, yes, the Obadiah Rockledge Department for Esoteric Research. Or was it Rutledge?" He waved a hand as though it hardly

mattered.

I worked out the acronym and smiled openly this time. ORDER. It seemed I was back in my magical society's good graces.

Before I could work my lips straight, Snodgrass's eyes jerked from the departing board members to me. "Oh, there's something funny going on, all right," he said. Without dropping his menacing gaze, he gathered his papers into a sloppy pile. "I'm going to be watching you, Croft. I'm going to get to the bottom of this. And you are *not* going to be smiling when I do."

I leaned toward him. "A little advice, Snodgrass? Next time you want to crap on someone, try pulling your pants down first."

His lips screwed up so tightly, I thought he was going to foul himself right there. Instead, he jerked the papers to his chest, stood abruptly, and marched from the room. When the door slammed behind him, I sagged in my chair, triumph giving over to weariness.

So I had my life, my job, a future with the NYPD that didn't involve a probation officer, and the blessings of the inscrutable Order. Was there anything that *hadn't* fixed itself in the last hour? Arnaud and the ring remained a point of contention, I guessed, and there might be some issues with Bashi, though I *had* dealt with the spell supplier. Word would get to Bashi eventually, if it hadn't already. The vampire I would worry about another time.

I patted the bandage on my left shoulder. Though it seemed the energy at St. Martin's Cathedral had jump-started the healing, I had my injuries to take care of. There was also the matter of a trashed apartment and exhausted wards, not to mention a succubus cat expecting goat's milk. With a deep sigh, I pushed myself up from the chair. The more things changed…

"I'm proud of you."

I wheeled in surprise. Caroline Reid, who must have been in the audience, smiled as she made her way toward me. Golden hair spilling over her shoulders, she looked angelic. I felt my cheeks flush as I remembered the pledge I'd made to myself while in the clutches of Sathanas—telling Caroline how I really felt. It had seemed such a good idea at the time.

"Hey, thanks for coming," I said.

She looked me over, fingers touching the bandage on my forehead. "Should I ask?"

"Probably not."

"Word at City Hall is that there was a break in the St. Martin's murder case." She laced her fingers into my right hand and swung it lightly. "Thanks to a mysterious consultant."

"I had some help," I said, squeezing her hand. If there was a moment to tell her, it was right now.

Her dimples reappeared. “So, where are you off to?”

She released my hand, and with the lost contact went most of my nerve.

“Um, I was planning to head home to take care of a few things. Change of clothes, of course,” I said with an embarrassed laugh. “Then I’ll be back for my afternoon class. I promised one of my students I’d be there.” I thought of Meredith, hoping she’d made it home safely.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

I glanced around to where I’d been sitting.

“Right here, sport,” she said. “You owe this girl a lunch.”

“Ahh, in that case…” I looked at my wristwatch. It was just shy of noon. “How does now sound?”

“It’s a date.”

We left the college together, stepping out into the stir of Midtown. Not running late for a change, I had a moment to inhale and take everything in. The sky was a bold blue for the first time in what seemed months, and warm sunlight sparkled up and down the block. Whether it was from the brilliance of the fall day or Caroline holding my arm, chatting happily, or the lingering high of whatever pain medication the nurses had shot me up with—or the simple fact I was alive—I loved my beautiful, broken city more than ever.

“Wow, stunning day,” Caroline said.

“Perfect,” I agreed, admiring the sun against her face.

As we entered the thick of the lunchtime crowd, though, I caught myself gripping my cane a little more tightly, invocations at the ready. After all, even on the finest of days you never knew who—or what—might be prowling the streets. And wizards made tempting targets.

Especially the wiseass kind.

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Blood Deal

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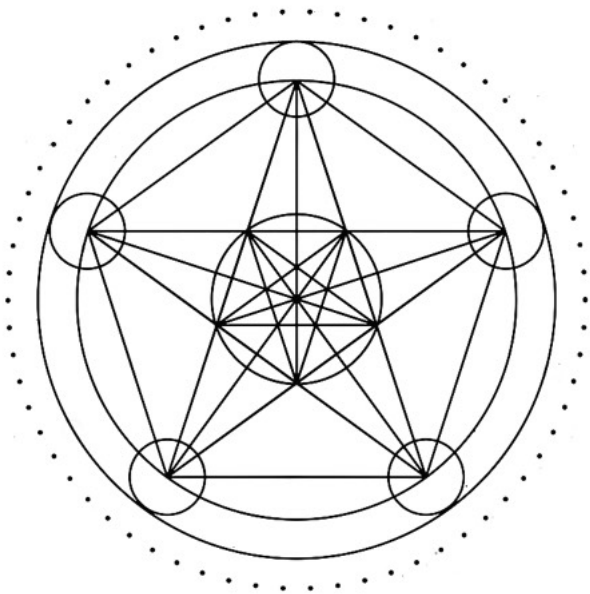
Book 2



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1

"V*igore!"* I shouted, my cane aimed at the lock.

In a burst of beveled wood, the lock exploded. Shouldering through the door, I stumbled into a living room. The ivory-white carpet and crowd of expensive décor gave me pause. Most amateurs were either those with a genuine interest in the esoteric or those who believed magic would pave the way to wealth and power. The already wealthy tended not to dabble. And yet, from down a corridor lined with gilded wine racks, the screaming picked up again, becoming a woman's pleas.

"For God's sake, do something, Morty! *Do* something!"

"Christ, Gert, can't you see I'm trying?" Morty's muffled response sounded more fed up than fearful.

I checked my hunting spell. *Did* I have the right apartment?

At the end of the corridor, I poked my head into a dining room. An aging woman who I took to be Gert was standing on a dining room table that would seat ten, white pumps kicking around a mess of books and casting items. She had both hands buried inside her frizz of dyed-black hair, startled eyes fixed on a kitchen to my right where a balding man in a camelhair sweater was jabbing a broom between a counter and fridge.

"It's going up the wall, Morty! There it is! Swat it!" Gert could have been talking about a mouse, but the spell paraphernalia, now spilling from the table, suggested otherwise.

I craned my neck for a better view. Beside the stainless-steel fridge, I glimpsed a scurry of legs that looked like human fingers. The crab-sized creature flattened itself to the wall and squeezed behind a row of ceiling-mounted cabinets. A whipcord tail disappeared last.

Crap. A riddler.

"It's getting into the family china!" Gert cried. "Stop it! Get it out!"

"What's it look like I'm doing?"

"Don't," I warned Morty, who had curled his thick fingers around the cabinet door. "Back away. Now."

He and Gert turned toward me, Morty's jowly face tilting in confusion. These were probably my least favorite moments as a wizard garbage collector, an informal title I still held. Or that held me. Never

mind that I'd banished a demon lord in October. The feat had restored my good—or at least tolerable—standing with the Order, but six months later, and here I was, having to bail out a pair of amateurs who didn't know toadstool from Toledo.

"That thing in there is dangerous," I said, which was a bit understated. A riddler's tail carried a razor-sharp ridge on the underside. One slash, and Morty would be looking at a severed broom and a fingerless hand—if he was lucky. Dangerous? Try lethal.

"Who are *you* supposed to be?" Gert asked in a New York-sharp accent, giving me a quick up and down. "Bruce Wayne?"

"Huh?" *Oh, the tuxedo.* "My name's Everson Croft. I heard screaming and came to investigate. You're in luck, I've dealt with these creatures before. I work in, um, extermination."

Morty backed from the kitchen, gripping the broom in both hands. He looked from the sound of rattling plates to me and back. "I don't even know where the thing came from."

"What do you mean you don't know where it came from?" Gert took my offered hand as she stepped carefully from the table to one of the chair seats, then down to the floor. She carried the powdered air of someone accustomed to being waited on and didn't thank me. "It came from those silly books. I told you they were trouble. I told you not to fool with them."

"You were the one who said we needed to start thinking outside the box."

"Starting a home business, Morty. Selling some of our assets, Morty. That's what I was talking about. Not whatever all of *this* is." She threw her arms toward the table. "And now we have something crawling willy-nilly over the family china that Emerson says is dangerous."

"It's Everson, actually," I said, eyeing the cabinets.

"And as an exterminator, *he* would know," Gert finished.

"Well, you're impossible to please," Morty grumbled.

"I'm impossible? *I'm* impossible?" Gert hooked an arm around one of mine to get my attention. "I hired a designer last month, one of the Upper West Side's best. She completely overhauled the apartment—I mean, completely. Did a *wonderful* job. Positive colors, feng shui, the whole shebang. Do you think Morty noticed? Do you think he voiced a single word of appreciation?"

Morty pulled on my other arm until I met his aggrieved eyes. "That was after I told her the apartment was fine as is, that we couldn't afford a designer. Do you think she listened to me?"

They began raising their voices over one another, even as something in the kitchen shattered.

"Listen," I said, freeing my arms and placing my hands on their

backs. “I’d love to stand here and play Dr. Phil, but I have a job to do. I’m going to need some space.” They were too engrossed in their argument to respond, but they let me guide them into the hallway, where they continued firing cannonballs.

“I kill myself trying to make you happy,” came Morty’s fading voice, “and all I hear from you is how bad I’m screwing up.”

“Well, you *are* screwing up,” Gert assured him.

I closed a swinging door behind them and turned to the dining room table. I immediately spied the black book he had cast from and groaned. Translated from Sanskrit, the book promised the caster the ability to summon a wish-granting genie. But without a magical bloodline, the best an amateur could hope for was a bug from a shallow nether realm—which was just as well. The bugs could be deadly, but the so-called genies could be downright apocalyptic.

I stepped into the kitchen, drawing my cane into sword and staff. Another piece of dishware broke as the riddler scuttled inside the cabinets. I tracked the sound with my eyes, right to left.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” I whispered.

In the cabinet above an eight-range stove, the clattering ceased. I took another step forward, a Word of Power on the tip of my tongue.

The cabinet door flew wide. In a pale flash, the riddler was launching toward my face, tail lashing, fleshy mouth slurping at the air.

I threw my staff and sword into an X in front of my face and shouted, *“Protezione!”*

A light shield crackled into being and sparked with the riddler’s impact. When something hot bit my neck, I realized the riddler had whipped its tail around. The creature was clinging to my spreading shield, mini plungers on its knuckled legs suckling for purchase.

“Respingere,” I cried, before it could lash me again. A force pulsed from the shield, blowing the creature back into the cabinets. Doors clapped, and several plates crash-landed to the tiled floor. The riddler ended up on the stovetop, legs kicking air before the tail popped it upright again.

I was preparing another blast when I felt blood welling from my neck wound, threatening to spill onto the tuxedo. “Oh, c’mon—this is a rental!” I cried. The last thing I needed was to lose my frigging deposit.

I entrapped the riddler in a dome of light and then grabbed a monogrammed kitchen towel from beside the sink. After sponging the laceration, I pinned the balled-up towel in place with a shoulder. *Yeah, this isn’t going to make fighting awkward or anything.* I wheeled around in time to see the riddler lash free of the light cage and scrabble behind the fridge.

“Oh, no you didn’t.”

Aiming my sword toward the space between counter and fridge, I cast a low-level force, hoping to push the riddler out the other side, where I had my staff aimed and a shield invocation waiting. A scraping sound told me the riddler was anchoring itself to the condenser tubing in back. Increasing my force only succeeded in shoving the fridge out at an angle.

I sighed. “You’re just not gonna make this easy, are you?”

I sheathed my sword and dug into my jacket pockets. My taboo-magic alarm had sounded after I had already left my apartment, so I was only carrying the bare minimum: a vial of copper filings and a couple of odd items. *But what’s this?* I pulled out another vial. *Ahh, now dragon sand I can use.*

I poured a tiny mound into the palm of my hand. More scraping among the fridge’s tubing—and now scrabbling. As the riddler’s finger-like legs wrapped around the side of the fridge, I shouted, *“Fuoco!”* and gave the granules a hard blow.

Fire spewed from my palm, enveloping the riddler in a dark-red plume that washed around the fridge. The creature recoiled with a cry—a horrid, high-pitched sound, like air being forced through wet flaps of flesh. I backed from the eye-stinging heat and waited. A moment later, the riddler emerged from the other side of the fridge in a smoking stagger.

“Don’t take this personally, little guy,” I said, aiming my cane at it. “Just doing my job.”

I enclosed the riddler in a light dome. This time, I pushed more energy into the spell, shrinking the dome like a fist to increase the pressure—something new I’d been working on. The riddler twitched and began to bulge in places. In a final fit, it raced in a tight circle, tail whipping, before dispersing in a burst of phlegm.

One less hole in our world. One less creature that didn’t belong.

“Hallelujah,” I muttered.

As I inspected the towel that had staunched my bleeding, voices grew in the corridor. I turned at the same moment Gert appeared through the swinging door. She and her husband were still pitched in argument, but when she glanced up, she stopped, her narrow jaw dropping.

“Morton, come here! Look at our kitchen!”

Admittedly, the kitchen looked like the site of a small bomb blast: fractured cabinet doors, spilled and smashed plates, a singed refrigerator. What mattered most, though, was the lack of human blood—better yet, the lack of a human body. I was about to point that out when Morty came up beside her.

“This some kinda joke?” he asked. “First the front door, now this?”

“Excuse me?” I said.

Gert threw her arms up. “And he’s going around calling himself an expert!”

“I’m right here, you know,” I told Gert, who clopped past me.

“Doesn’t he know this stuff costs money?” Morty plodded after her. “What’d he say his name was?”

“Edgar something,” Gert said distractedly.

“Well, if he thinks he’s getting any more of our business, he’s got another thing coming,” Morty decided.

Man, I really was ready for another level of wizarding.

As Morty and Gert fussed over the damage, I turned to the offending spell book. Using the copper filings, I created a casting circle around the book, then dusted its black cover with dragon sand. I closed the circle and whispered, *“Fuoco.”*

A controlled fire hissed up, consuming the tome. It would be ashes inside of thirty seconds, whereupon the fire would safely self-extinguish, but I couldn’t wait. A glance at my watch told me what I’d feared. I was running late, and this one was a biggie: a date with my colleague Caroline Reid.

I was almost to the destroyed front door when Gert unleashed a scream. “He’s set fire to the table, Morty! He’s trying to burn down our apartment!”

I shook my head and muttered, “Yeah, you’re welcome.”

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2

I almost forgot to tip the elevator man before hurrying into the crowded reception hall. Fortunately, the address had only been a short cab ride from Morty and Gert's place, but I was still twenty minutes late. Not terrible for me, but terrible under the circumstances.

This was to have been Caroline's and my first date. A trial date, we decided—or rather she decided. Caroline had been skeptical over the whole idea. As I rose onto my tiptoes and searched the formal crowd, I had the sinking feeling I'd just given her plenty of reason.

"Don't strain yourself," a voice said near my ear.

I turned to see a woman I almost didn't recognize. Her golden hair, usually worn down in waves, had been straightened and parted across her brow, then knotted into an elegant pattern behind her head. Her dress was no less stunning. The lace over her shoulders joined a mauve bodice that opened at the waist into slender, stylish folds to complete the floor-length gown.

My stagger was no performance. "Wow."

Caroline stepped forward and kissed my cheek. "Looking sharp yourself, Professor." The scent of her perfumed skin made the room waver. I planted my cane and returned the kiss.

"Listen, sorry I'm—"

"What's this?" she cut in. Her blue-green eyes were studying the spot on my neck where the riddler had lashed me. The wound had stopped bleeding, and I'd put healing magic to it on the way over, but judging by Caroline's attention it must have still looked angry.

"Oh, shaving error," I said, faking an embarrassed laugh.

"Nice try, Everson, but that didn't come from a Gillette."

"Straight razor, actually. Nothing like the original, until it decides to slice you open. I couldn't get the gash to stop bleeding, which is why I'm running late. I'm really sorry about that. I should've called."

Lies on top of lies. Great way to kick off a relationship.

"I'm just glad you made it." Caroline relaxed her scrutiny of the wound and took my arm. Together we surveyed the ultra-wealthy crowd. "I always feel like a fish out of water at these things."

"I thought these were your people," I teased.

"By proxy," she replied. "But if I have to listen to one more person

rue the tax burden of owning a second home in the Hamptons or, God forbid, an Italian villa, I'm going to gouge out my eardrums with a caviar spoon."

"Ouch."

I took two flutes of champagne from a passing tray and handed one to Caroline. With a smile that relaxed her shoulders, she clinked my glass, and we sipped.

The venue was the penthouse of an affluent New York developer, the event a fundraiser for Mayor Lowder—or "Budge" to most New Yorkers—who was seeking reelection in the fall. Caroline didn't belong to the affluent or political classes. Her father worked as an attorney for the mayor's office, and she was here tonight in his absence—though probably also to freshen up her own contacts. I supposed that went with being the city's preeminent expert on urban affairs.

When I looked over, she had polished off her champagne, surrendering the glass to a white-jacketed server. She seemed to steel herself before turning to face me.

"The secret to mingling," she counseled, "is to keep moving, like you have someplace you're determined to get to."

"And where's that?" I asked.

I followed her raised eyes to a second-story gallery. "If we can make it upstairs, there's a balcony with an incredible view of Central Park. We'll step out to catch our breath."

"Sounds like a plan."

And that was where I would tell her the truth about who I was, I decided. I couldn't keep holding a curtain up over the other half of my life. *Nope, nothing to see back here.* There was a good chance she would reject the truth—reject me—but I wasn't going to lie to her anymore.

"Ready?" she asked after I'd relinquished my glass.

My heart beat like a bass drum. "Let's mingle."

Caroline nodded and wheeled toward the crowd. I followed, a hand on her low back. Despite her just-voiced reluctance to play socialite, Caroline was a natural. Her face glowed as she exchanged greetings and kisses, turned to introduce me, clasped hands with women, joked with men, closed with vague promises to get together soon, and then proceeded to the next group.

I leaned toward her ear as we edged deeper into the crowd. "Sure *you're* not running for mayor?"

She turned just enough to give me an eye roll.

"Caroline," a gravely voice called from our left. It took me a moment to place the aging man with the iron-colored hair and bushy black eyebrows.

"Mr. Moretti," Caroline said, a smile dying on her face. "What a

surprise."

Constantine Moretti, head of New York's last Italian crime family, stepped forward in a striped charcoal suit, a woman with lush auburn hair on his arm.

"For a second there, I thought you were gonna walk right past. Like father, like daughter, I guess." His grin didn't reach his eyes. "You remember my wife, don't you?"

Caroline turned toward the middle-aged woman who, despite her formal black dress, possessed an aura that felt feral. She appraised Caroline with orange-tinted irises before offering her hand.

"It's good to see you again, Anita," Caroline said.

Anita nodded and accepted Caroline's hand, her nostrils opening out.

"So what's it gonna take to get your old man to return my calls?" Mr. Moretti asked.

Caroline's neck stiffened. "You're asking the wrong person."

Mr. Moretti peered around. "Is he here?"

"No. He … he wasn't feeling well."

"Maybe you can give him a message."

"I'm not his answering service."

Mr. Moretti flashed another hard grin. "Relax. I was just gonna say, if he needs anything to be sure to let me know. We grew up in the same neighborhood, your old man and me. He ever mention that? There's no reason why old neighbors can't give each other a boost now and again, right?"

"I can think of a few," Caroline muttered.

"Tell him hello in any case," Mr. Moretti said. "I'll try him again this week."

"Have a good night," Caroline said, and moved away from him.

"What was that all about?" I asked when we were out of earshot.

"Oh, Moretti refuses to accept that the old days are gone. His family used to control construction and trucking in the city. That's how they built their empire. But as City Hall severed those connections, and other crime families moved in to dominate the vice trades, Moretti's revenue dried up."

I nodded in understanding. "And he wants access to the mayor's office to try to resurrect his old businesses."

"Exactly, but he's barking up the wrong tree. My father would never work with his kind." Her gaze moved past me and hardened. She changed course, as though trying to disappear from someone's view.

I peeked back, expecting to find Moretti tailing us. Instead, another man stood out, mostly for his tall, broad-shouldered build—and yeah, stellar looks. His copper hair and stone-hewn face belonged in a men's

fitness magazine. Though engaged in conversation, he was clearly watching us, or at least Caroline.

Old flame? I wondered, a knot of jealousy hardening my gut.

Caroline squeezed my wrist. "This is Everson Croft," she said.

I turned distractedly and then nearly dropped my cane. I was standing in front of a smiling Mayor Budge Lowder and his wife, Penelope. I'd seen both on TV and in the papers, of course, but never in person.

Budge seized my hand and began pumping away. "What do you say there, Everson?"

Despite being on the far side of fifty, Budge Lowder had a boyish look. It was a combination of his baggy tuxedo, chubby face, and the dark cowlick he kept finger-combing to keep from spilling over a pair of round glasses. The look was almost comical, but I remembered Caroline once saying that only a fool would judge the man on appearances.

"It's an honor to meet you," I said.

"Hey, when you show up with a knockout like this," the mayor replied, cocking his head toward Caroline, "the honor's all mine." He clapped my shoulder and broke into hearty laughter that put me at immediate ease.

"Behave yourself," Caroline told the mayor, frowning in disapproval. "Everson's a colleague."

"Oh, yeah? Over at Midtown College?" Like a switch had been flipped, Budge went from being a barroom pal to a sober uncle, his large brown eyes turning soft with interest. As Caroline fell into conversation with the mayor's wife, the mayor edged closer to me. "What do you teach?"

"Ancient mythology and lore," I replied.

"Yeah? I've got a small collection of the Greek myths."

I raised my eyebrows. That was farther than I got with most laypeople on the topic.

"I devoured those stories as a kid," he went on. "All those heroes and creatures. But the human condition's in there too, isn't it? The good, the bad, the absurd." He gave a sad laugh as he peered around. "I should know. I live it every day."

Even though he was a political personality and no doubt working me for a vote, I caught myself nodding sympathetically. Stuck between the developers, debt-collectors, mob bosses, vampire bankers, and six million mostly-struggling New Yorkers, I would never want the man's job.

"Oh, hey." Budge perked up. "I haven't introduced you to my better half." He placed his arm around his wife and, without asking, pulled her from her conversation with Caroline. "Penny? This is

Everson Croft. He's an expert in mythology over at Midtown College."

I noticed that he'd upgraded me to expert. This guy was good.

Penny's handshake was soft, almost apologetic. Indeed, with her pretty, pale features and quiet voice, she seemed Budge's polar opposite. I found my sympathies shifting to her.

"Pleased to meet you," she said.

"Oh, and he and Caroline are tying the knot," the mayor added with a prankish grin. He flinched when Caroline swatted his shoulder. "Hey, I can foresee these things!" he protested.

"Do you have any advice for us?" I asked, giving him a conspiratorial wink.

The mayor straightened and cleared his throat as though he were about to deliver an important speech, then relaxed with a smile. "It's pretty simple, kids. Know when to agree, when to disagree, and when to agree to disagree." He looked over at his wife. "Isn't that right, honey?"

She gave a forbearing smile. "Whatever you say, Budge."

The mayor laughed and hugged her to his side. "That works too."

"Well, if you'll excuse us." Caroline took my arm. "My fiancé and I have a wedding to plan."

That got the mayor slapping a thigh. "Hey, we expect an invite!" he called after us.

The men and women who had been waiting for an audience with the mayor shoved into our wake.

"He's fun," I said.

"Yeah, until he's not," Caroline replied thinly.

I waited for her to explain, but we had arrived at a spiral staircase that she seemed determined to climb. Two twists later, and we were on the gallery level. A comma formed between Caroline's eyebrows as she scanned the sea of guests below, probably looking for the man who had been tracking her. I followed her gaze, but couldn't spot him.

We continued along the gallery, passed through a set of glass doors that opened onto a balcony, and stepped outside. A cool breeze ruffled Caroline's gown. I removed my tuxedo jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

"You're a gentleman," she said.

"I try," I answered.

"You *are* trying, aren't you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for starters, you're getting to your classes on time. I can't remember the last time I had to cover for you. You've been attending all of the faculty meetings. You've upgraded your wardrobe. You even smell nicer." A small smile played at the corners of her lips. "If I didn't know better, Everson, I'd say you were trying to impress someone."

I felt my face flush. “Or trying to keep Snodgrass off my back.”

She made a skeptical sound. “Well, *I’m* impressed, anyway.”

Impressed enough to accept what I’m about to tell you?

We were leaning our elbows on the east-facing rail, taking in the dark expanse of Central Park. From our high vantage, its dangerous wilds and moonlit reservoir held a certain romance.

Now was the time to make my bold confession about wizarding, about what I felt for her. My heart slammed harder as I opened my mouth. But when I turned, Caroline’s brows were bent in distraction.

“Is, ah, everything all right?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh, fine.” She was holding my jacket closed at her neck. “These kinds of events tend to overwhelm me. It might not look it, but I prefer observation to participation. Probably why I’m a researcher.”

Nice try. But you’re trying to bullshit a bullshitter.

“Are you sure that’s all it is?”

“Yes, Everson.”

Despite our flirtatious banter of only moments before—and that we still had the balcony to ourselves—a formality had grown between us, hardening the air. And I knew it had everything to do with the man she’d spotted inside. I turned so my body was facing hers.

“If you ever need help with anything,” I said, “you only have to ask.”

She gave a ghost of a smile. “I know, Everson. Thank you.”

All right, that went nowhere.

I was debating whether to ask her pointblank about the mystery man, when I realized we were no longer alone. Someone was standing just outside the glass doors, about ten feet behind us.

“Caroline?” a voice said.

I turned to find tall, dark blond and handsome stepping toward us. He moved with the purpose and elegance of young royalty, but there was something else going on with him. Something I hadn’t picked up in the crowded reception hall. The man’s aura. He wasn’t human, but a full-blooded faerie.

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New York's fae were among the oldest families in the city. Lords of great wealth, they operated on the periphery, their motives alien. They also wielded magic, including glamours to appear human. That made me feel a little better about the man's divine looks, but if that magic was a threat to Caroline…

I moved in front of her, my grip tightening around my cane.

"It's all right." Caroline rubbed my back. "Everson, this is Angelus," she said coolly.

Geez, even his name sounded divine.

The fae crossed the remaining distance in three easy strides and offered his hand. He had a good four inches on my six-foot frame, and I had to look up a little to meet his slate-blue eyes. His shake was sturdy and polite but hummed with energy. A small head tilt told me he felt my energy, as well.

Neither of us said anything, as though reaching a silent accord between extraordinary gentlemen.

After another moment the fae being released my hand and turned to Caroline. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"You are, actually," Caroline said.

"If I could just speak with you for a few minutes."

"I already told you we had nothing to discuss."

My gaze moved between them, wondering what in the hell kind of relationship Caroline could have with a full-blooded fae.

"You'll want to hear what I have to say," Angelus said, his handsome eyes steady on hers. "It involves your father."

That seemed to give Caroline pause. She sighed as she turned to face me, her set expression letting out a little. "Would you mind if I stepped inside for just a moment?"

"As long as you're okay," I said.

"I'll be fine. We're not going far."

Not wanting to appear the insecure date, I nodded my assent.

She gave my hand a squeeze, then passed through the door Angelus had opened for her, my jacket still over her shoulders. As Angelus closed the door, our eyes met briefly. I could read nothing in his.

He and Caroline took up a position along the rail of the gallery, visible beyond the diaphanous curtains covering the doors. I turned back toward the Park, but kept the two in my peripheral vision. The fae's distance from Caroline appeared respectful as he began to talk, Caroline facing him with crossed arms.

I was speculating on what they could be discussing—something about her father?—when a series of high-pitched beeps sounded. I looked around in confusion before realizing the sound had come from my pants pocket.

The pager.

I drew it out, its cold-iron case doing the job of protecting its circuitry from my magical aura. (I'd tried the same with a cell phone, but no dice—a lot of smoke, though.) I recognized the number flashing on the display. Detective Vega had been working her superiors in the NYPD to give her first crack at the unusual homicide cases. She had also been holding me to my agreement to act as a consultant.

I looked from the pager to Caroline and back.

"Crap," I whispered.

I opened the glass doors and poked my head inside. Angelus, who had been saying something about a "fair exchange," stopped as he and Caroline noticed my presence.

"Sorry," I said to Caroline. "I just received a page I need to return. Do you know if there's a telephone around here?"

"You can use mine." She began to unsnap her small purse.

"No, no, I've, ah, never been able to figure those things out," I stammered, which was to say I didn't want to explode her thousand-dollar device. "I was thinking of a landline."

"There's one in the guest bedroom," Angelus said. "Through that door." He aimed his gaze past me, toward the far end of the gallery, and took a half step back, as though my presence were making him uncomfortable. I looked at Caroline, who gave a small nod: *I'm all right.*

"Okay," I replied, in a tone I hoped sounded like a warning to Angelus.

I noticed that he waited until I reached the indicated door before he resumed speaking. Though I tried, I couldn't make out anything said above the steady swell of conversation coming from the lower level.

Caroline's a tough cookie, I reminded myself.

Yeah, but did she know who she was dealing with? Not everyone was willing, or able, to see the supernatural dimension of the city. And in the years I'd known Caroline, she had never brought it up herself, always hewing to the rational, the mundane. No, I was all but

certain Caroline didn't know who he really was. Furthermore, I was certain this *Angelus*—if that was even a real name—was deceiving her, something the fae were known for.

I flipped a light switch in the elegant suite and spotted the phone on an antique desk to my right. To reach it, I passed the foot of a sumptuous king bed that reminded me of something else the fae were known for. Seduction.

I left the door open a crack, and then moved the phone to the desk's end, where I could still see a thin slice of Caroline and Angelus down the gallery.

Consulting my pager, I dialed.

"Vega," she answered after one ring.

"Are congratulations in order, Detective?" The last time we'd talked, a month earlier, her new role had been far from a sure thing.

She ignored my question, posing her own. "Where are you?"

"At a fancy little gala on the Upper West Side," I replied, then mumbled, "watching my date being hijacked by a being who shouldn't exist." I leaned over to see them better through the door.

"Give me an address and I'll have someone pick you up."

"Why?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"What do you think?"

"Homicide?"

"Plural, and they're unusual. I need you to take a look." She wasn't asking.

I craned my neck until it started to stiffen. Caroline was gesturing in what appeared frustration while Angelus listened with small nods, hands behind his back. I didn't like the idea of leaving Caroline alone with him, though whether out of concern now or jealousy, I couldn't say.

"Croft," Vega snapped.

Through the fuzzy connection, I made out the chatter of a police-radio and the rise and fall of sirens. It sounded serious. I pivoted the phone from my mouth to exhale in frustration, then dug for the slip of paper onto which Caroline had jotted down the address for the gala.

"You ready?" I asked, and read it to her.

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"You're leaving?" Caroline asked.

"Yeah, an emergency came up." I flashed the pager as though offering proof. I glanced over at Angelus, who had stepped back to give us space, and moved closer to Caroline. "I'll explain later," I told her.

And maybe you'll return the favor.

"Well, all right," she said, eyes dark with disappointment. "Oh, your jacket." She removed it from her shoulders and helped me into it, making me feel like even more of a dipshit.

"I'll give you a call tomorrow," I said, "make sure you got home okay." I kissed her cheek. As I stepped past Angelus, I shot him a look that said, *If you lay a finger on her, so help me God, I will hunt you to the ends of this world and any others you try to hide in and gut you like a goblin.*

He responded with a vague nod.

Outside, I paced the front of the building, cursing the timing of Vega's page. I had just walked out on a first date with Caroline Reid—the woman I'd been pining after for two years—and left her with an immortal. Whatever Vega was calling me to had better be good.

It wasn't long before a dark blue sedan pulled up. When the driver side window slid down, I groaned. The hefty man with a wreath of tight brown curls was an associate of Vega's. He had been a little too eager to deliver my pencil for a bite-mark analysis in the fall, I remembered.

"You gonna make me idle here all night?" Hoffman asked in a brusque New York accent.

I dropped into the passenger seat and slammed the door, inhaling a stale fusion of coffee and baked-in cigarette smoke. I kicked around some fast-food bags until I had enough foot room, then buckled in and peered over at Hoffman. "So where are we headed?"

He ignored my question and circled the block. "For the record, I don't agree with this thing here." He gestured between us, though I knew he meant the NYPD contracting me as a consultant. "Ask me, you're a con man, and the worst kind."

"Tell me what you really think."

“Demons and hocus pocus?” He snorted. “You lifted that straight from television.”

“I read too, you know.”

“Twenty years I’ve been out here, and I haven’t seen anything that couldn’t be explained by common sense and good policing.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re taking orders from a fourth-year detective,” I suggested.

The balls of Hoffman’s greasy cheeks turned red. “And hey, I know that was you who called, trying to get Vega’s address and number. Think I’m stupid?” He was referring to the night in October when I’d tried to warn her about an imminent shrieker attack. “You impersonated a police detective,” he went on. “That shoulda got you five years, right there.”

“Instead, I got the rest of my probation wiped.” I smiled with as many teeth as I could. “Funny how that worked out.”

“Look, I don’t know what kind of swindle you pulled to get Vega on your side, but it’s not gonna fly with me. Try another stunt like that phone call, and I’m putting you in bracelets. We clear?”

“Tell me, Hoffman, are you always such a flirt?”

“Screw you,” he said. “You’re the one who looks like a fruit.”

I followed his glance down at my rented tuxedo, complete with cummerbund. He might have had a point.

Hoffman coughed into a thick fist, as though clearing the final bits of rant from his chest. “All right, so here’s what we’re looking at. Double homicide at Ferguson Towers.”

“*That’s* where we’re going?” A sprawling housing project between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, Ferguson Towers was notorious for all manner of illicit activities—from sophisticated drug operations to contract killings. To say they had a crime problem was like calling someone with stage four cancer “under the weather.”

“Yeah, don’t know why we’re wasting our time,” Hoffman said. “The stiffs are a pair of junkies. Probably knocked off for getting behind on payments or something. Or maybe another junkie had his eyes on their stash. But Vega don’t like something.”

“What’s that?”

“The pair of them had their necks torn open,” he said.

In post-Crash New York that wasn’t exactly jarring. “Is there a ‘but’ in there?”

Hoffman looked at me sidelong. “There wasn’t enough of a mess.”

“A bloodsucker?”

“Maybe, but that don’t mean a vampire,” he said quickly, eyebrows raised. “Plenty of sickos in this city to go around. Who knows? Maybe one of ’em has a chronic iron deficiency.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. But we weren’t talking about a human.

TEN MINUTES LATER, we heaved onto a curb and passed through an open chain-link gate. Ahead, a handful of police vehicles and an ambulance huddled in the gathering night fog, lights strobing. Grim towers took shape around us. Hoffman parked among the vehicles on the project's central plaza.

"Piece of advice?" he said, killing the engine. "Watch your head when we go in. Just last week an officer had a brick dropped on him from an upper story. We're not exactly celebrities around here."

"No catching bricks with my head," I replied. "Got it."

"I know you can't shed your outfit, but you might want to lose the dandy bits. That's likely to earn you a cinderblock." He gave a guffaw before radioing to Vega that we'd arrived.

I unknotted my bowtie and stuffed it into a pocket, wishing I'd worn my trench coat. As I leaned forward to unclasp my cummerbund, I examined the forbidding towers. There were six of them, three clustered on one side of the plaza and three on the other, a half-mile of chain-link fencing surrounding them.

Geez, I thought, grabbing my cane. *What kind of supernatural would want to mess with this place?*

"Stay close," Hoffman said.

We left the sanctuary of his car, Hoffman hustling toward the nearest tower, sidearm readied. I whispered a Word as I followed. Light from my cane slid into an umbrella-shaped shield. Peering through it, I half expected to see bricks dangling over the sills up and down the steep columns of windows. Instead, I made out silhouetted heads behind security bars. Despite what Hoffman had said, I sensed more fear in their blacked-out gazes than malice.

We stepped into a dingy lobby of caged ceiling bulbs, and I dispersed my shield. Ambulance attendants idled around a pair of empty gurneys. A pair of officers emerged from a stairwell.

"Any witnesses?" Hoffman asked the officers.

"If so, no one's talking."

"They're not even opening their doors," the other one said. "We did an entire vertical tour. The whole tower looks like a frigging ghost town."

"Damn Stiles," Hoffman muttered. "Well, go on and check out the other towers."

The officers glanced at each other nervously before pacing out the front door.

"Who's Stiles?" I asked.

"Runs the east towers."

"Is he the manager?"

“Don’t worry about it,” Hoffman said. “Victims are down here.”

“Down, you said?”

“Got a problem with that, Merlin?”

A nauseating blend of heat and cold broke out across my face as pressure began to build against my chest. *Other than my major phobia of being underground?*

“No,” I wheezed.

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I followed Hoffman's wide frame and wavering flashlight down two flights to a littered landing. A stench of stale urine pervaded the space, undercut by the ripeness of recent death.

"Down here," Detective Vega called from beyond a propped-open door.

Hoffman and I descended another short flight of steps, arriving in a boiler room fit for an eighties slasher film. A convolution of old pipes and valves ran around the cold, damp space. We stepped over soiled clothes and brown drug envelopes until we arrived in a back room.

Vega, in her black suit and blouse, was talking to a member of what appeared to be a forensic team. A crime-scene light glared hot over a pair of draped bodies. I couldn't imagine the heat was helping the smell.

Vega finished her conversation with the technician and turned toward us.

"So what's going on?" I asked, my throat tight around my words.

Vega trained her dark eyes on the bodies. "The victims were killed sometime last night. Maintenance man found them a couple hours ago."

"Hoffman said the cause of death was torn jugulars?"

Hoffman was grunting goodbye to the forensic team as they began to file out around us. "We won't know until the autopsy," Vega replied. "But it's the most visible sign of trauma."

"And no blood?"

"Not *enough* blood. I've seen opened throats before. They leave small ponds."

I tucked my cane under an arm and accepted the pair of latex gloves she handed me. As I donned the gloves, I made a cursory assessment of the covered bodies. The two were sitting side by side against the opposite wall, only their ratty shoes showing. "Could their throats have been slashed *after* they were dead?" I asked. "Maybe they OD'd."

Hoffman huffed, but didn't say anything. He seemed better behaved around Vega.

"Some drug stuff *was* found on them," Vega allowed. "But the

attack would had to have happened after the blood started to thicken and settle, and that takes about eight, ten hours."

"But you don't think that's what happened."

Light gleamed from her pulled-back hair as she shook her head. She led me to the closer body and lowered the sheet from his face.

His youth struck me first. A white male, he couldn't have been older than twenty, twenty-one. A tousle of rust-colored hair topped a gaunt, rigid face. His gaping eyes were dilated, either from death or fear.

"Ready for the rest?" Vega asked.

"I think so."

She dropped the drape to his chest, exposing the man's throat. Or what was left of it. His trachea had been cracked in two and forced aside. Rags of flesh and gray vessels hung from the gaping wound, as though powerful jaws had clamped down and shaken violently.

I glanced over the young man's sweatshirt and faded denim jacket. "I see what you mean about the blood," I said. With the condition of his throat, the man's clothes should have been painted black. But except for a few flecks, they could have been fresh off the Salvation Army rack.

"Take a look at the skin around the wound," Vega said.

I leaned closer until I recognized a pattern. Like a dinner plate that had been licked clean, only a few thin, rust-colored streaks remained. Whatever had killed this young man had sucked out his blood, then lapped up the stray splashes with its tongue.

I swallowed hard against a tide of bile. "And the other victim?"

"Same," Vega said.

I stood back to indicate I'd seen enough.

"Forensics took saliva samples," she said, replacing the drape over the victim's face. "Also picked up some potential trace evidence, including fresh bullet casings. But with the backlog and that we're dealing with junkies…"

"It's going to take weeks," I finished for her.

"Try months. I was lucky to get forensics to even come down here. So, what could we be looking at?"

I pulled off my gloves, remembering to pocket them. The last time I'd left gloves at a crime scene, a demon had cast from the sweat inside them. "Well, not your garden-variety killer, that's for sure."

"You hired him for that?" Hoffman said.

Vega turned her back on him. "Reminds me a little of the disembowelment cases."

"There are similarities," I said. "But lower demons wouldn't have stopped with blood. They would've cleaned out the vital organs, derived as much sustenance from the victims as they could."

“What about a greater demon?” Vega asked.

I suppressed a proud smile. Vega had made a radical transition in her thinking that few could have managed without heavy meds. But we weren’t talking about a greater demon either—the Order would have picked up its presence. Sure, they had missed Sathanas, but he’d been partially hidden by the powerful energy that flowed around St. Martin’s Cathedral. No such energy existed around Ferguson Towers.

In response to Vega’s question, I shook my head.

Her brows folded in. “Well, what does that leave?”

I flipped through a mental reference of supernatural beasties in greater New York. Werewolves had crossed my mind when I first saw the throat—the moon cycle was right—but while werewolves were maulers, they weren’t bloodsuckers. Ditto ghouls and trolls, who left very little of their victims intact, gnawing down to bones, and often eating those, too.

Conversely, vampires would do a great job of explaining the lack of blood, but not the torn-up throat. They tended to be precise in their blood draws. Unless it was…

“A blood slave,” I mumbled.

“A blood what?” Vega said.

“Sorry.” I blinked up at her. “I’ve told you about the vampires in the city, right?”

“You mean Wall Street?” Though Vega’s acceptance of the supernatural had come around in a big way, it seemed she still carried a reserve of skepticism sometimes. Like now.

“Well, the heads of the big investment banks,” I said. “Arnaud Thorne at Chillington Capital is the oldest and most powerful. He and his fellow vampires control a lot of things in the city, including small armies of blood slaves. Humans who were vampire-bitten.”

“I thought they became vampires, too,” Vega said.

“Not always. That process involves the vampire giving some of its own essence back to the victim, but in the case of blood slaves, the vampire mostly takes—blood, emotions, identity. The vampire hollows the person out, essentially.”

“And then controls him,” Vega said.

“Exactly. As long as the blood slave *remains* under the vampire’s control.”

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” Hoffman complained. “Vampires? Blood slaves?” He waved a hand at the whole idea and left the crime scene, his heavy shoes pounding up the steps. “Load of crap.”

Vega rolled her eyes. “He’ll come around.”

“I’m not holding my breath.”

“What did you mean by *as long as the blood slave remains under control?*” she asked.

“Well, history is dotted with legends of blood slaves breaking their masters’ hold. Without a mind of their own, and deprived of their own blood—for centuries, in some cases—the blood slaves go on a bit of a rampage. Tearing open throats, drinking down all they can.”

“What about the size of the wound?” Vega’s gaze had shifted to the covered victims.

“A slave’s jaw can unhinge. Combine that with their superhuman strength…”

“But how can we be *sure?*”

“We find him,” I said.

“Super. How?”

I pulled a folded kerchief from my pocket and opened it beneath a steady drip of water falling from one of the pipes.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Preparing a spell.” I returned to the first victim and, wincing, exposed his torn-open neck again. With a finger tenting the kerchief’s damp center, I ran it along an area of intact skin where the creature had licked. “A hunting spell. With the saliva, I should be able to lock onto the creature’s location. Would it be a problem if I set up a casting circle down here?”

“If you promise not to shove me inside.” She was referring to the night I’d placed her in a protective circle to protect her from a shrieker attack while I went after the demon lord Sathanas.

“Heh. Special circumstances, Detective. Won’t happen again.”

Vega backed up a safe distance anyway as I hunkered down and began to sprinkle out a circle of copper filings.

“I have a question,” I said, “and don’t take this the wrong way, but when did the NYPD start caring about drug addicts? I mean, some would say the killer did the city a favor. And with all the homicides out there… I guess what I’m asking is why do *you* care?”

“I’m trying to prevent a war.”

I stopped and looked up at her. “A war?”

At that moment, a riot of angry shouts sounded from upstairs. Vega drew her sidearm and broke into a run. I left my copper circle half finished and followed, cane pulled into sword and staff.

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We arrived upstairs to find Hoffman and four NYPD officers shouting down their aimed firearms at three men across the lobby, two of whom were aiming assault rifles and shouting back. The third, a shaven-headed black man, stood between his armed associates in a pair of aviator sunglasses, arms crossed. Between his lips, a toothpick slid back and forth.

In the confusion and close acoustics, I couldn't make out a word being shouted, but something told me the lobby was one slammed door from becoming a shooting gallery. I readied my staff for a shield spell.

Before I realized she'd left my side, Vega was marching into the middle of the mayhem. My heart leapt into my throat. She was putting herself right in the potential crossfire.

Vega waved her arms overhead. "Everyone shut the fuck up!"

Within seconds, the shouts wound down, giving way to ringing echoes.

Vega looked sharply from one side to the other. "Now lower your weapons." She holstered her own pistol, which seemed either incredibly bold or stupid. When no one complied, Vega stepped up to the man with the shades and toothpick. His lean leather coat rippled around his boots.

"Stiles," she said sternly.

It was the man Hoffman had mentioned, the one in charge of the east towers. The toothpick between Stiles's lips stopped moving, and he said something over a shoulder. His men eased back and lowered their assault rifles.

After another tense moment, the police responded in kind. My own shoulders let out as I sheathed my sword into my staff.

"Now, do you want to tell me what this is all about?" Vega demanded.

Hoffman jutted his chin toward Stiles. "Scumbag put a gag order on the towers. No one's talking, meaning we can't do our jobs."

Vega turned to Stiles. "Is there a reason for that?"

"Maintenance shouldn't have called you," he replied, his voice deep and even. "We manage our own affairs."

“Oh yeah?” Hoffman challenged. “So what are two stiffs doing down in your boiler room?”

“We’ll take care of that,” Stiles said.

“I bet you will,” Hoffman muttered.

“Let me guess,” Vega said. “Revenge hits?” When Stiles remained silent, Vega nodded. “One of Kahn’s dealers showed up at Manhattan General last week with a stump for a right hand. Which means he was caught selling in your towers, right? And now you think what happened downstairs is Kahn’s retribution—taking out two of your clients, sending a message. Well, I’ve got a news flash for you. You’re not as smart as you think.”

The toothpick paused for a moment before resuming its back-and-forth slide. My gaze moved to Stiles’s henchmen. The one to his left had the lumped-up face of an NFL lineman, while his partner looked like he was on leave from the Mexican wrestling circuit for unnecessary roughness. Though they aimed their weapons floor-ward, their thick fingers remained tense on the triggers.

I hope to hell you know what you’re doing, Detective.

“We have a lead on someone,” she continued, “and it’s not any of Kahn’s people. If you’ll let us do our job, we’ll bring the perp to justice, and you and Kahn can carry on, business as usual.”

“Business as usual,” Stiles said, “is cops not invading my buildings.”

“Oh, you think this is an invasion?” Hoffman gave a hard laugh. “We’ll show you an invasion, buddy. Got a list of crimes a mile long we could nail you for.”

“Then why haven’t you?” Stiles asked.

Hoffman’s red cheeks balled up. “Smartass sonofa…”

Vega showed him a staying hand before training her gaze back on Stiles—a man whose illicit profits probably paid officials and Midtown lawyers to keep him in business. Vega was up against someone she couldn’t strong-arm, and I could see in her eyes she hated that.

“Look, we get that these are your towers.” She swallowed as though the words were leaving a bitter residue. “Just let us do our jobs here, and I’ll keep you current on the investigation. Tell you about any arrests. But you’re gonna do a couple of things for me.”

“Really,” he said evenly.

“First, you’re gonna put out the word that anyone who saw something can talk to us.”

His shades remained fixed on her face. “And…?”

She drew up her five-foot frame. “And you’re not gonna act on what you *think* happened downstairs.”

“I can’t promise that.”

Vega’s anger broke its dam. “Where do you think this is gonna

lead, huh? You kill two of his, he kills four of yours, you turn around and kill eight, and pretty soon this place is ground zero." She drew in a hard breath and pushed it out through her nose. "You've got three thousand people in your towers, more than half of them children. Same for Kahn and the west towers. Think, for God's sake!"

So this is the war she's trying to prevent, I thought. *Two drug lords ruling opposite sides of the same project, and the police can't lay a finger on either one.* I remembered the silhouetted heads I'd seen peering down from the caged windows like frightened prisoners.

"Just…" Vega forced another breath. "Just give us time. A month, at least."

Stiles's toothpick journeyed back and forth for several more rounds. "A week."

"Get real," Vega said.

Stiles muttered something over his shoulder, prompting NFL to step forward and punch the button for the elevator. As the three moved past Vega, the Mexican wrestler dug into his pants pocket and handed her what looked like a business card. Vega begrudgingly gave him one of hers.

"Fine, a week," she said as the three boarded the elevator. "But we have a deal, right? No retribution."

The flaps of Stiles's coat billowed as he turned, his henchmen flanking him, their assault rifles at opposite shoulders.

"We have an understanding," Stiles said. "But only because it's you." Though I couldn't see his eyes, I felt them looking over the rest of us in contempt. "Now take the bodies and get out of here. I don't want to see another blue uniform or flashing light tonight." Though he spoke evenly, his words carried the promise of real violence. He inclined his head forward. "And Ricki." The barest smile lifted his lips. "Welcome home."

The elevator door rattled closed.

I STOOD over the casting circle, aiming the opal end of my cane at the kerchief with the swabbed-up saliva. Though the confrontation upstairs had been heart-pounding, I wasn't as concerned as Vega over the one-week deadline. Chances were good we'd find the bloodsucker tonight.

I spoke an incantation and white light swelled from the gem, absorbing essence from the steaming fabric. "That's right, my homicidal friend," I whispered. "You can run, but you can't—"

Without warning, the light sputtered and went dim. The cane took on weight as the power rushed out of it.

What?

I looked from the opal to the kerchief before pushing more energy into the incantation. The kerchief smoked, then broke into flames.

"*Crap*," I spat, stomping out the fire.

I retreated from the smoking casting circle and examined my cane, which remained heavy and dull. Something was blocking the spell. I circled the room, head bowed low, until I saw what. At the angle between the wall and floor, the thin trail went all the way around the room.

"Well that's just flipping *fantastic*."

"What's going on?"

I turned to find Vega entering the room. "The killer covered his tracks. Made it so any part of himself he left behind—hair, skin cells, saliva—couldn't be connected back to him. At least not energetically."

"How?"

"Salt." I scuffed my shoe over the barrier. Power left the room in a soft whoosh. "It's often used as an energy container, less often as a disrupter, but it gets the job done. Magic that tries to push past it sort of craps out." I shook my cane as one might a faulty electrical appliance.

Vega stooped over the salt. "The techs thought it was boric acid, for pests. Guess you can't blame them for not thinking magically." She straightened again. "Can't you just do the spell in another room?"

I shook my head. "Once the connection's broken, it's broken. The killer knew what he was doing."

"Pretty clear thinking for a mindless blood slave."

"Yeah," I grumbled, "that's bothering me, too."

Vega paced the room, swearing under her breath. Her anger wasn't hard to translate. Unless she caught the killer, Ferguson Towers was going to erupt.

She stooped beside a grate in the floor, opened it on a rusty hinge, and shone her flashlight down. Apparently deciding the pipe was too narrow for someone to have climbed, she huffed and kicked the grate closed.

"If we can't track it," she said, "what does that leave?"

I swept a shoe over my casting circle. "Stiles is going to allow witnesses to talk to you, right? Maybe someone saw something. And then there's forensics. If you can make this a priority case—"

"You're telling me my job, Croft. I'm asking what *you* can do."

I scratched the back of my neck. The truth was, my specialty was nether creatures, not vampiric beings. Meaning if I was going to help Vega, I needed to study the crap out of them.

"I'll look into it," I said at last.

"Look into it?" Her eyebrows collapsed down. "We only have a

week, Croft."

"I'll have something before then. I promise."

"Yeah," she said thinly. "I know about you and deadlines."

I held up three fingers of my right hand to form a W. "Wizard's honor."

Vega shook her head. "Come on. I'll give you a ride."

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7

Detective Vega and I left the tower together and hurried toward the cruisers. When we were safely in her sedan, I remembered something. “Hey, what did Stiles mean when he said, ‘Welcome home’?”

She yanked the gearshift into drive. The sedan jerked forward, scraping a neighboring cruiser. “What do you think?”

I looked from Vega to the grim towers and back. “You lived here?”

“Tower two. Room twelve thirteen.” She peeled from the plaza. “Six of us in a one-bedroom.”

“So you have three siblings?”

“Four. All brothers. Our dad raised us.”

That went a long way toward explaining her take-no-crap attitude.

“For how long?” I asked.

“Till I was twelve. Our dad got us into a subsidized home in the Bronx. More room, safer neighborhood, though both were sort of relative.”

As she jounced the sedan off the curb, I craned my neck around at the towers. “And you knew Stiles back then?”

She hesitated before answering. “He was my first boyfriend.”

I looked back at her with a surprised laugh. “What?”

She shrugged. “I was young and dumb.”

I’d picked up on some sort of familiarity between Vega and Stiles, but wow. That gave the standoff in the lobby a whole new context.

I searched for something to say. “So … were you able to stay friends?”

“Where am I dropping you off?” she asked abruptly, glancing over at my tux. “The Copacabana?”

I was surprised she’d tolerated my prying into her past for as long as she had, but with my concerns shifting back to Caroline, it was just as well. I dug out the address for the gala.

“Upper West Side,” I said. “One Hundred Fourth Street.”

Fifteen minutes later, we pulled in front of the crenellated apartment building.

Vega’s dark eyes glinted over at me. “Look, Stiles might play the cool cat, but he’s got a quarter-inch fuse. That much hasn’t changed.

He says he'll stomach us for a week, but if the creature strikes there again, forget it. Which means we can't let that happen. I need you to commit to this, Croft."

"I'm committed, I'm committed," I said, my gaze wandering to the front doors. I hoped I hadn't missed Caroline, especially if she'd left with—

Vega's hand clamped my jaw and squeezed.

"Ow!" I cried through smooshed-together lips.

"I'm serious, Croft. No crapping around or getting pulled into other things. Not until we find the killer." She released my jaw, the place where her fingers had pressed still throbbing.

"Yeah, yeah, it's a deal." I worked my jaw around. "Geez."

"I'll check in with you tomorrow."

Before she could decide to grab my jaw again, I backed out the passenger side door. Vega watched me, concern for the residents of the Towers anchoring her stare.

"It's my spring break this week," I said. "No teaching duties. I'll give it my full attention."

"Good."

As the sedan sped away, I paced to the front doors of the building. The concierge, a pleasantly plump man with an obvious toupee, opened the door a couple of inches and raised his thick eyebrows.

"Yes?" he asked, pronouncing it *jes?*

I read his glinting nametag. "Hi, Javier. I was here a little earlier, for the gala?"

"Jes, Mr. Croft. I remember you from check in."

"Good memory. Is it still going on?"

"Oh, no-o-o," he said. "Gala over. Everyone leave."

Damn. "Did you happen to see a young woman with blond hair done up in back? Light purple gown with lace up here? She would have been carrying a small white purse."

"Beautiful woman?"

"A stunner, Javier. An absolute knockout."

"Ahh, jes, I remember. Your date?"

"I … yeah, I think so. And you saw her leave?"

"Oh, jes. I see."

"Did she leave with…" I swallowed. "…with someone else?"

The man's face tilted in what appeared confusion. "What you mean, Mr. Croft?"

"I mean, did a man escort her out?"

"You mean someone else?"

I squinted at him. *That was what I just asked, wasn't it?*

"That's right, someone else."

"No-o-o-o?"

"Look, just dish it to me straight, Javier. Yes or no?"

"Beautiful woman leave with someone else?" He shook his head. But he was still giving me that *wtf?* look, meaning something wasn't quite translating. I peeked past him to the concierge desk, where I could make out the top of a telephone. Probably easier to get the answer from the source.

"Would you mind if I made a call?"

"Oh, no-o-o, Mr. Croft. Only I can use. Building rule."

"All right, fine." Exhaling, I looked around. "Do you know if there's a payphone close by?"

He pointed past me. "Two block. But you should not be out at night."

Thanks for the public safety tip, pops, but you're not leaving me much choice. I nodded and wheeled to leave, but then turned back. "Tell you what, Javier. While I find that phone, would you mind calling me a cab?"

"Jes. Can do."

"Great, have him swing by the payphone." I was about to leave again, when I noticed Javier holding out a hand. "Oh, right."

I pulled out my wallet and flicked through the nest of small bills until I found a five. I handed it to him, stuffed my wallet away, and set out at a fast walk, hoping there was enough left for the taxi. Though I earned a decent salary through the College, the costs of wizarding remained just shy of prohibitive. Another reason to log some hours with the NYPD.

But first I needed to contact Caroline, make sure she'd arrived home safely. Leaving her with a full-blooded fae was feeling more and more careless, especially with Javier's odd responses now clunking around my stomach.

I was halfway down the block when I heard footsteps. I drew my cane apart and wheeled, but not fast enough. A force rammed me in the jaw. When my knee banged into something hard, I realized I'd dropped to the sidewalk, sword and staff clattering from my grip. A throbbing pain spread from my right cheek, its epicenter the size of a fist.

I blinked up as I pawed the sidewalk for my weapons. A short distance away, three men stood in dark suits. Rising to my feet, I turned and hawked a rag of blood.

"Excuse me," I said woozily. "Think I just ran into one of your fists."

"Everson Croft," the blond-haired one said.

A bone-deep chill radiated from him. Coupled with the hollow voice, I knew why. Arnaud Thorne's blood slaves. I glanced down at my naked ring finger. Wonderful. This *would* be the one night I'd

remove Grandpa's ring and leave it on the dresser because it didn't go with the tuxedo. The same ring that just happened to protect me from Arnaud and his vampire ilk. But maybe that was a good thing.

"Sorry, fellas, but if you're here for the ring, you're out of luck." I held up my fingers. "See?"

In dark slashes of motion, the three surrounded me. "We have a message for you," Blondie said.

I looked from one circling set of hollow eyes to the next. Eyes at odds with their smooth, youthful faces and tailored suits, but a chilling reminder of their preternatural strength, speed, and blood lust. Silently, I called power to my casting prism, grip tight around my weapons.

"A message?" I said.

Blondie, the designated speaker, pressed closer. "Stay away from Ferguson Towers. It's not your concern."

Though my mind was still foggy from the blow, it wasn't hard to work backwards. If Arnaud had blood slaves watching the crime scene and tailing wizards-for-hire, he had some sort of interest in the crime itself. Which seemed to fit with the theory I'd floated to Vega.

"Aww, what happened?" I asked. "Did one of your pals wander off the reservation?"

A blow collapsed my stomach, the sick pain folding me over.

"Do you understand?" Blondie asked.

I gasped for air. Okay, maybe popping off smart to one of Arnaud's undead had been a bad idea, but I had this thing about being muscled around—which seemed to happen an awful lot.

"Understood," I whispered. "Just do me a favor and tell Arnaud…" I gathered my breath as the blood slaves leaned nearer. *"…respingere!"*

My staff crackled with light and an orb-shaped shield exploded from its white opal. The force blasted the blood slaves up and back a good twenty feet. All three landed on their feet, however, stunned but not hurt. Maintaining my shield, I turned in a slow circle, sword held out.

The slaves started forward. A single blood slave I could probably handle. But three? I swallowed hard, the taste of copper slick on my palate. This could get really ugly really fast.

"Hey!" A sharp whistle. "You the one that called a cab?"

I turned to find a taxi idling at the corner. I started to wave him to safety, but when I peeked back, the sidewalk was empty, shadows of buildings where the blood slaves had once stood. I sheathed my sword and limped toward the cab, jaw aching, a nauseous stone in my stomach. There was a reason I had stayed out of the Financial District for the past six months.

Behind me, a cold voice cut through the wind: "You've been

warned.”

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8

It was after midnight when I stepped over my threshold and into my West Village apartment, locking the door's three bolts behind me. I stood for a moment in the dark, the tension easing from my neck, my shoulders. It had been a hell of a night, and to be back in a familiar, protected space, remnants of my own magic charging the air, comforted me. Until my cat spoke.

"You look like shit, darling."

I found Tabitha's ochre-green eyes hovering above the divan beneath the west-facing window. I sighed and turned on the floodlights. "You know, a simple 'welcome home' would be nice now and then."

"Why does your face look like a catcher's mitt?"

I touched the hard knot on my jaw where the blood slave had driven his fist. "Here again, starting with 'Are you all right?' would be the polite approach. Then you could bring up the mitt."

I paced over to the kitchen, dug an old bag of peas from the back of the freezer, and pressed it to my throbbing jaw. No sense wasting healing magic on a little swelling.

Tabitha shifted her forty-pound pile of fur so she could watch me without lifting her head. "Any luck with what's-her-name?"

"Who?" I asked, knowing full well she meant Caroline. I did my best to keep Tabitha out of my personal life. She approved of roughly zero of the women I had dated, and wasn't shy about telling me. I suspected at least some jealousy at play, not to mention frustration. Tabitha was a succubus spirit trapped in a cat's body. Her days of seducing and consuming men were long past.

"Oh, don't play coy with me," she said. "I heard you on the phone earlier."

I eyed the rotary behemoth on the kitchen counter, the need to call Caroline burning inside me. But I wasn't going to call her in front of Tabitha.

"Have you done your tours tonight?"

"Oh, not this again," she moaned.

"A deal's a deal. Food and five-star accommodations in exchange for a tour of the ledge every two hours."

“Five-star? This place?” She snorted and closed her eyes. “No one’s interested enough in your dump—or *you*—to be watching.”

“Excuse me. Were you not here this past fall? What were those creatures called that came and attacked us? Oh, right—*demons*.”

“Old news.” She paused to stretch, while a yawn showcased her impressive teeth. “The six months since have been an absolute bore.”

“Well, cheer up. That’s probably about to change,” I said, thinking of Arnaud’s warning. “Out. Now.” When she didn’t move, I exercised the nuclear option. “No more goat’s milk until you do.”

She sighed and heaved up her bulk. Only after staring daggers at me did she drop from the divan. “You’re such a brute sometimes.”

“Anything out of the ordinary,” I reminded her. “Or anyone watching. Especially if they’re young men in expensive suits.”

She muttered something I probably didn’t want to hear and squeezed through the cat door. With Tabitha out of the way, I swapped the bag of peas against my face for the phone receiver and dialed Caroline’s number. Just hearing her voice would do wonders for my anxiety.

I got her recorded voice instead. Nuts.

“Hey, Caroline,” I said, trying to sound casual. “Just wanted to check in and see how the rest of your night went. Make sure you made it home all right. I’m sorry again for ducking out like that. There was a good reason, actually. I was hoping I could tell you about it over breakfast. Or brunch, whichever. My treat. Anyway, if you could give me a call when—”

The voice mail cut me off with an abrasive beep.

“—you get this.”

I hung up, feeling like a bumbling fifteen-year-old. Good thing Tabitha hadn’t been around—I would never have heard the end of it.

All right, so either Caroline’s phone was out of service range, which would never happen in the city, or she had shut it off for the night to sleep. Alone, I hoped.

Tabitha reappeared just as I was placing the frozen peas back against my jaw.

“Anything?” I asked.

“No male models in suits.” She hopped up on her divan and collapsed onto her side. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Arnaud must have figured he’d made his point. Meaning I was now stuck between his warning and my pledge to help Detective Vega.

I prepared Tabitha a bowl of warm goat’s milk, fixed myself a pot of Colombian dark roast, and climbed the ladder to my library/lab. It was late, my face and stomach hurt, my ego was bruised, and I wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and shut off my brain, but I had work to do. Stepping past my hologram of the city—dim,

thank God—I stopped and faced the wall of mundane books.

"Svelare," I said in a low, thrumming voice.

A ripple moved across the spines. In the next moment, encyclopedias and classical titles became magical tomes and grimoires. I retrieved a thick black book from the bottom shelf, a tome on the undead. At my desk, I took my first sip of coffee and opened the book to a section concerning vampires—blood slaves, in particular. I jotted down notes on a yellow legal pad as I read.

An hour later, I closed the book and reviewed my notes, pen tapping between my teeth. It was looking like a good news, bad news scenario—and unfortunately, more of the second.

Good news: being unsophisticated creatures, blood slaves tended to lair in the same proximity to where they fed. That narrowed our search radius considerably. Bad news: that small radius also meant that if we failed to find the creature before he fed again, Ferguson Towers could be looking at body number three—and if Vega was right, at an all-out war between Stiles and this person Kahn in the west towers.

That was bad news item number one.

Bad news item number two was the blood slave itself. I hadn't needed to read up on them to appreciate their speed, strength, and lethality. A blood slave, especially one without a master, would tear through Detective Vega and her squad like lunch meat. I would need to be physically involved, not only in the search, but in the creature's eventual execution. Thanks to my research, I had plenty of material to work with in that second department—silver through the heart being the most surefire way of doing the deed.

But the fact that my direct involvement *was* needed led to bad news item number three: Arnaud Thorne.

The vampire had warned me off the case. If I ignored his warning, his slaves would be back, this time to deliver more than a stiff jaw. I had Grandpa's ring now, sure, but we weren't talking about a showdown at the O.K. Corral. Arnaud would pick the time and place, and not by mutual consent. I probably wouldn't even see his slaves before I was missing limbs.

I stood with my cup of coffee and paced the length of the bookshelves. Though hard to understand at times, vampires had their own code of decorum. For an eminent vampire like Arnaud, losing control of a blood slave and having it run amok was tantamount to weakness, profoundly embarrassing. He probably wanted me off the case so he could take care of the errant slave without anyone knowing. Maybe all I had to do was back off for a couple of days. Let Arnaud's blood slaves snatch up the killer and sweep him under the rug.

I returned to my desk and penned a report to the Order on the night's riddler banishment. I had already asked for, and received, permission to work with Detective Vega, but I included a reminder anyway. When dealing with the Order, it was always better to err on the side of caution.

The message sent, I cut the lights and headed down to bed. Despite my exhaustion, I tossed and turned, seeing the disappointment in Caroline's eyes when I told her I was leaving, remembering Angelus's subtle possessiveness. I couldn't shake the feeling I'd lost her, somehow.

Eventually, I fell into a dark and troubled sleep.

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9

Though I had set my alarm, it was the ringing telephone that woke me the next morning. I held my wind-up clock to my face—*eleven?*—and thrashed out of bed. The phone rang again, hopefully Caroline responding to my message left last night.

I reached the telephone on the fourth ring, clearing the sleep from my throat, and lifted the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Sleeping in, Croft?"

"Oh." My heart sank. "Hi, Detective."

"What do you have for me?" she asked.

"Well, I had an interesting encounter last night," I said, carrying the telephone over to my reading chair and plopping down. Tabitha regarded me dully before closing her eyes again. "After you dropped me off."

"Related to the case?"

"Three of Arnaud's blood slaves jumped me, warned me to stay away from Ferguson Towers."

"Did they say why?"

"I'm fine, by the way. Thanks for asking." I moved my jaw around. The knot was gone but the right hinge remained sore. "They didn't say much other than that it was none of my business."

"Good work, Croft. Be sure to turn in your hours. We'll take it from here."

I sat up. "Wait a minute. What are you talking about?"

"If Arnaud's involved, the killer's probably one of his."

"Yeah, but you can't just take an elevator up to his office and ask him."

"Why not? He's made himself a person of interest."

I remembered my meeting with the vampire back in October, one that saw me offering Arnaud my throat before Grandpa's ring blew him off me. "I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"

"I've told you what he is, but you can't possibly understand."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"He's dangerous, Vega. Like, *super* dangerous."

"Right, and you said the vampires have survived by keeping a low profile. Offing an NYPD detective doesn't strike me as fitting that M.O."

She had a point—under normal circumstances. But if Arnaud was as desperate to make this go away as I suspected, the normal rules might not apply.

"Well, give it a couple of days," I tried. "Maybe he'll take care of the matter himself."

"We don't *have* a couple of days," she cut in. I didn't have to see her face to know her brows were crushing together. And it was my fault for telling her about last night's encounter, dammit. In my just-woken state, I hadn't been thinking clearly. I should have kept the run-in to myself.

"Why don't…" I couldn't believe what I was about to say. "Why don't you let me talk to him?"

"One, you're a consultant, not an investigator," Vega replied. "And two, how would you even get downtown?"

Good question. The last time I'd made it past the wall that fortified the Financial District, I'd very nearly gotten shot. Scratch that—the last *two* times. A third run at the Wall would be testing fate.

"Then let me come with you," I said.

"You're still on the forbidden entry list. *I* can't even get you through."

An idea hit me. "I might be able to do something about that." I carried the phone into my bedroom and over to where I'd thrown my tuxedo onto the back of a chair. I stooped toward the jacket, inspecting the fabric closely.

"Are you gonna clue me in?" Vega asked impatiently.

"Aha!" I plucked out a curly brown hair and held it up in triumph. "Just be here in an hour."

"I don't like surprises, Croft."

"Oh, and grab me an ID."

"What?"

I hung up and tried Caroline. Voice mail again.

I set the phone on the counter and held the hair I'd plucked closer to my eyes. I would have to put my concerns for Caroline aside for the moment.

I had a potion to cook.

"YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING," Vega said, staring over at me.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" I shrank against the passenger seat as Vega jerked the steering wheel, narrowly missing the back of a

stopping bus. We shot into the center lane of Broadway, Saturday morning traffic honking and hooking from our path. Vega swore and laid on her own horn. After seconds that felt like minutes, the view outside the windows stopped wobbling. “Sweet Jesus,” I sighed, releasing my death grip on the door handle.

She glanced over at me. “A little warning next time?”

I looked down, smoothing the tie over my now-ample paunch, and tugged my brown polyester jacket straight, part of the suit I’d picked up at the corner consignment store while my potion was cooking. “I warned you the copycat potion could take effect any minute.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you’d look just like him.”

I swung down the visor until my eyes stared back from the mirror. Detective Hoffman’s eyes, actually. I studied his damp red face, then turned my head slightly, combing thick fingers through the wreath of curly hair. The same hair my tuxedo jacket had picked up in his car last night.

“Well, I’m not sure how long it’s going to last,” I said. “I didn’t have a lot of his material to work with. Meaning we’re going to have to get through pretty damned fast.”

I watched the approaching Wall, a giant concrete barrier that fortified the Financial District from the rest of Manhattan. Sweat was already soaking through the back of my shirt as Vega slowed toward the short line for official vehicles. Ever since I’d climbed into the car, my wizard’s intuition had been tingling in the bad way.

“Be cool,” she said.

“And you be careful,” I replied.

The car ahead of us pulled through, and a pair of armored guards waved us forward with automatic rifles.

“ID,” the one on Vega’s side said.

The guard on my side tapped my window. I powered it down and squinted up at him. Though the private security guards all looked like steroid-infused clones, I recognized this one’s square jaw. He was the same guard who had tried to wrench Grandpa’s ring from my finger in the fall.

He caught me staring. “You got a problem?”

“No, no problem. ID’s right here.” I pulled it up by the cord around my neck.

He aimed his shield sunglasses at the card, then at my face. “What’s your business down here?”

Vega ducked to peer past me. “We’re following up on an investigation.”

“I asked Porky here,” the guard growled.

Though it was actually Hoffman he’d insulted, the muscles in my jaw bunched up anyway. I forced a deep breath. “Yeah, we’re

following up on something," I said as sedately as I could.

"With who?"

"Arnaud Thorne," I said. "If he'll see us."

According to Vega, ever since I had used her car to leap the checkpoint, security at the Wall had become more stringent. If a vehicle, even an official one, didn't proceed straight to the stated destination, the private guards would swarm.

Square Jaw remained staring at me. A tiny camera in the corner of his glasses clicked and whirred. By his silence, I guessed someone was speaking into his earpiece.

After a moment he opened the car door. "Out of the vehicle."

My heart lurched. "What do you mean?"

"You deaf?" He took the rifle strapped around his torso into both of his hands. "I said out of the vehicle."

"You too," the guard on the other side ordered.

I peered over at Vega, the skin of her brow taut. I remembered her telling me these guys could turn an NYPD officer into Swiss cheese without fear of reprisal. All thanks to the vampires holding the city's purse strings. Vega gave me a single nod before stepping out on her side.

"What's this about?" I asked in a tone of professional impatience.

Square Jaw used his rifle barrel to jab me around. "Hands on the hood." He spoke over the car to Vega. "You. Open the trunk."

Fear and humiliation burned over my face as I splayed my hands against the sedan's warm metal. A moment later, hands pummeled my pockets and slapped up and down my legs. I'd left my cane and necklace at home and secured Grandpa's ring behind the metal button of my pants. The guard missed the last, no doubt because he wasn't looking for it. I widened my stance to hold up my slipping waistband. The potion in my system was starting to thin.

"Where's your piece?"

"I'm not carrying one today," I said.

He called to the back of the vehicle. "Anything?"

I turned but couldn't see Vega or the other guard behind the raised trunk door.

"Vehicle's clean," the other guard said. "Her piece is standard."

Square Jaw pulled me from the hood and shoved me toward the car door. "You're clear to pass."

The trunk door slammed closed and Vega got in on her side, brows angled sharply down. I was ducking my head to join her, relieved the enhanced screening was over, when Square Jaw seized the scruff of my jacket and yanked me back.

"Hey," I cried. "What do you think—"

He spun me around against the car, looking me up and down.

“What’s your problem?” I demanded.

But I knew. The firming of my face, the thinning of my body, the itch of hair growing back atop my head—my potion was running on fumes. I was changing before the man’s eyes.

“Hey, Parker,” the guard called to his partner. “Come take a look at this shit.”

Parker sauntered around the vehicle, rifle in his grip. He snorted. “Magic user. I’ve been itching to bag one of these freaks.”

“That’s not all,” Square Jaw said, a hard grin pulling his mouth to one side. “It’s the same guy who gave us shit about the ring, remember?”

Parker nodded slowly, then ducked to look into the sedan. “And isn’t this the broad who pulled her piece on us?”

“Sure is,” Square Jaw said. “Close the line.”

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The hydraulic-powered gate whirred closed behind us, clunking into the cement wall and sealing us inside an area the size of a large garage. Bollards blocked our way forward. Parker trained his rifle on Vega, while Square Jaw moved his own rifle around to his back. He pushed his sleeves up.

"C'mon, guys," I said, one hand held out, the other balling up the side of my pants to keep them from puddling around my ankles. "I'm sure we can work something out. I'm decent with love potions if you guys are having any trouble in that department."

Square Jaw snarled.

"N-no," I stammered, "I didn't mean with each other."

The fist Square Jaw drove into my chest stunned my heart. I pawed toward him, mouth gaping, no air going in or out. His other fist came up beneath my chin, slamming my mouth closed with a bloody clack. I landed against the car, my head thrown back on the roof.

"Not such a smartass now, are you?" he said.

"I don't know," I answered blearily, buildings whirling overhead. "My reserves are pretty impressive."

I straightened and stared around. I could hear Parker behind me, shouting for Vega to drop her weapon and get out of the car. But the more immediate danger was Square Jaw, who was moving in with both hands as though to throttle me. I jacked my right knee up and caught him square in the jewels.

Square Jaw's hands changed course, diving for his groin as he grunted and collapsed to his knees. Behind me Parker's shouting rose in treble before getting drowned out by the sedan's engine.

What the…?

I skipped back as rubber screamed over road top, foul smoke billowing from the rear tires. The sedan began to spin, slamming into walls. The front fender came around and clunked Square Jaw in the helmet, dropping him like a sack of bricks. Parker opened fire, bullets pinging off metal and reinforced glass.

I called power to my casting prism. Aiming a hand at Parker, I shouted, *"Vigore!"*

Without my sword to concentrate and direct the force, it burst from my palm like branch lightning. Launched from his feet, Parker slammed into a wall, his weapon and pieces of gear clattering around him. He landed face first, like a flipped pancake. But my force had also caught the rear of the sedan, pushing it sideways so that its front end was now aimed at me.

I could see by Vega's startled expression that she'd lost control. She wasn't going to be able to stop the car. And I wasn't going to have time to cast.

I stumbled back against the steel door. The sedan fishtailed, Vega's side plowing toward me—and then stopped with three feet to spare.

I looked from Vega, who had thrown her arms up, to either side of me. I was no longer alone. I recognized the blood slave to my right from last night, Blondie's hands clutching the side of the hood. He and the other blood slave shoved the car away, the heels of their patent leather shoes braced against the metal gate. They looked at me dispassionately.

"Thanks?" I said.

"Mr. Thorne will see you," Blondie said.

The other blood slave stepped over to Square Jaw, who was groaning on the pavement, and shoved him with a foot. "Let them through," he ordered.

VEGA KILLED the engine and peered past me to a pair of blood slaves in brass-button suits.

"Think it's some kind of trap?" she asked.

I studied the doormen and then ran my gaze up Arnaud's landmark skyscraper. "You can never tell with a vampire. But that we're here at his invitation tells me no. It's considered impolite for a vampire to tear apart his guests. That doesn't mean we can relax our guard, though."

"So why invite us?"

"Good question." I began working to untie the thread I had used to secure Grandpa's ring to the inside of my pants. "Either he wants to send a sterner warning or he wants something else entirely."

"Like what?"

"No telling." I freed the ring and slipped it onto my third finger. "Just stay close."

"You think he's going to let you in wearing that? Didn't you say it burned him or something?"

At Vega's question, the ring grasped the base of my finger more tightly. "Short of severing my finger, I don't see how he's going to get it off me. But I don't think that's his concern right now or else his

blood slaves would've shaken me down back there. I think we're good on the ring."

"Fine, but this is still an official investigation. I'm asking the questions."

I showed my palms—*no arguments here*—and we got out of the car. The copycat potion spent, I cinched my belt around my too-large pants and followed Vega toward the front entrance. As the blood slaves opened the glass doors, Grandpa's ring began to pulse with the enchantment of the Brasov Pact, the centuries-old truce between European wizards and vampires.

"Welcome," a lilting voice called from across the chilly lobby. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I made out the pretty face and white-blond hair of the undead receptionist. "Mr. Thorne is expecting you."

"Thanks," I muttered, then signaled for Vega to follow me to the elevators, where two more blood slaves stood.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist said pleasantly. "Not her."

I stopped. "What?"

The receptionist tilted her head in a show of apology. "Mr. Thorne has requested to meet with you alone, Mr. Croft." She nodded at Detective Vega. "She can wait down here."

Vega's hands balled into fists as she stalked toward the desk. "Excuse me, *Miss*, but I'm an NYPD detective on official business. I need to speak to Mr. Thorne as part of an investigation."

The receptionist's smile conveyed coldness now rather than empathy. "His lawyers are off today. If you'd like to make an appointment, Mr. Thorne may agree to see you next week."

"Listen to me, you little—"

"We understand," I interrupted, gripping Vega's upper arm. I whispered into her ear as I turned her away, "I've been through this song and dance with them before. It's pointless. I say you let me go up there and see what I can get him to tell me about Ferguson Towers."

"I don't care what he is," Vega seethed. "This is *bullshit*."

"Yeah, I know."

Vega was having a bad run, from her confrontation with Stiles to the checkpoint guards and now this. But I was relieved, to be honest. I'd seen Vega in action enough times to know she only knew one speed—full throttle. If she went into Arnaud's office, jabbing him with questions and accusations, he would grin, fold his hands, and tell us nothing.

"Thinks he's above the law," Vega went on, her accent regressing to her housing-project roots. "I don't care what City Hall says. I'll take the pale son of a bitch down myself."

"Now, now." As I steered her toward a sitting area, I noted several blood slaves watching us. "Let's keep that kind of talk to ourselves,

hmm?”

Vega looked around, seeming to pick up on the attention, too. She straightened, as though to re-professionalize, and looked me straight in the eyes. “Get me a name, a location, something we can use.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Before Vega could change her mind about letting me go up alone, I hurried toward the elevators.

I shifted my weight on the swift ride up, wondering what in the hell I was getting myself into. After the St. Martin’s case, I had resolved never to return to the Financial District. And now here I was —not only in Arnaud’s territory, but en route to his executive office. I shuddered at the memory of the vampire’s fangs and cold breath against my throat.

The elevator door slid open on the top floor, and the blood slaves escorted me down a long hallway of dark carpet and oiled wood. The tantalizing scent of Arnaud’s office, a mixture of leather and musk, seemed to beckon. Arnaud’s head blood slave received me at the tall doors of the office. I recognized him by his almond-shaped eyes and short monk’s bangs.

“How nice to see you again,” Zarko said in a mocking voice.

“I can’t say the feeling’s mutual,” I replied. I wasn’t being smart. The last time we’d seen one another, his hand was wrapped around my throat, and he was holding me two feet in the air.

He opened the right door, grinning as he bowed.

The strong scent of Arnaud’s office enveloped me and penetrated my thoughts. I struggled to hold them together—I needed to be coherent to face Arnaud—but the soft carpet underfoot told me I had already entered his lair.

Through a pool of tannic brown light, I made out a lean figure, a pale mane of hair falling to his shoulders. The mane shook with soft laughter.

“Oh, my poor boy,” came Arnaud’s silky voice. “You have really gotten yourself into a pickle this time.”

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I squinted through the distorting light, forcing Arnaud into focus. He was wearing one of his patent silk suits, light-colored, loose around the arms and legs, a scarf draping his shoulders, open shirt underneath. His dark eyes sparkled as he looked me over, a smile forking his thin lips.

"And just when I'd begun to forget about our unpleasant encounter last fall," Arnaud said. "You were very nearly in the clear, my boy."

Though he spoke with an edge of menace, he wasn't trying to incite fear. Not like the last time. On the contrary, he was layering the atmosphere with an opiate mist. Whether as insurance against me trying to use the ring or as a simple demonstration of his power, I couldn't say.

"What do you want?" I asked, correcting my sagging posture.

He chuckled. "I'm not the one who came seeking you, Mr. Croft."

"Would've made things easier," I grumbled, rubbing my swollen jaw.

"Would that have been your preference? To sit and talk at your place? Next time, perhaps."

"Yeah, sure," I said, waving a hand. Before my weakening legs could give out, I made my way to his arrangement of oxblood leather chairs and sat. "Do you mind?"

I caught a subtle tensing in Arnaud. I was being a poor guest.

"Zarko," he called. "Be a dear and prepare Mr. Croft and me a couple of Scotch on the rocks. The vintage '32 would be nice."

"Depression-era?" I said. "Wow, that makes me all warm inside."

"This is an *eighteen* thirty-two," Arnaud corrected me.

"Oh."

The vampire took a seat opposite me. He folded his legs neatly and studied me for a long moment before opening a hand of slender fingers. "Well?"

"Fine, we'll start with why I came, and then you can tell me why you agreed to meet." I blinked against the blearing effect of the opiate and cleared my throat. "I received a visit from three of yours last night. Why?"

"Oh, were they not clear? I shall have to speak to them about

that."

"Cut the crap," I said. "You know what I'm talking about. Why warn me away from Ferguson Towers?"

With the ring to protect me, I felt I could be a little more forward. Especially since I didn't know how long I could hold out.

Seeming to understand time was on his side, Arnaud accepted his drink from Zarko, sniffed it, and then swirled it several times. At last he took a small sip and sat back, pale tongue slipping across his lips. "You cannot beat a good Scotch," he said. "Distilled right here in New York, in fact, shortly before the Great Fire of '35. Very tragic. So many fine buildings lost. Well, go on." He nodded toward the glass Zarko had set on my end table. "That's a small fortune you're neglecting."

"I didn't come here for the spirits," I said. "What's your interest in Ferguson Towers?"

He waved a hand dismissively. "As an investor, I have interests throughout the city."

"A housing project? Please. Let's walk through it, shall we? Two junkies are found murdered in a boiler room yesterday, their throats ripped open. Someone pours salt around the site to prevent magic from connecting the evidence to the murderer. And shortly after a wizard leaves the crime scene, three more someones shove him around and tell him to get off the case. Seems like an awful lot of trouble to protect a killer. One of yours, I assume?"

"Oh, assumptions are such dangerous things."

"If you're willing to spell out an alternate theory, I'm all ears."

"Mr. Croft," he said, swirling his glass lightly. "Do you know how many people I employ here?"

"Oh, they're people now?"

"Hundreds. And of those, do you know how many have resigned without my consent?" He leaned toward me. "Exactly none."

I struggled to hold his blurring face in focus. "There's a first time for everything."

"Not in this case, Mr. Croft."

"Then the creature belongs to one of your banking buddies, and you're trying to corral it before it can draw a spotlight on what you really are."

Arnaud sat back with a chuckle. "There you go again, Mr. Croft. Assumptions, assumptions. What makes you think the killer is one of ours?"

"Oh, I don't know—that the victims are all blood drained."

"Ours isn't the only kind with a taste for blood, you know. And was it merely blood the *creature*, as you call it, was after?"

My head dipped, and I jerked it upright. I wasn't going to be able to hold out much longer. "Look, whatever we're dealing with, do I at

least have your assurance that you're going to take care of it? I get that this has to be an embarrassment for you."

"How I choose to act is none of your concern."

"Well, maybe it concerns the six thousand people living in those towers." In my drug-hazed state, the silhouetted faces I'd seen in the windows seemed to be moving around me.

"Ah, you humans and your sentimentalities," Arnaud said. "You could accomplish so much more without them."

I nearly swooned again. When I righted myself and blinked, it felt as though the skin around my eyes had puckered. And what had I accomplished here? Denials from Arnaud that the killer was one of his. Another warning to stay away from the case. Vega wasn't going to be happy.

"You brought me up here to tell me something," I managed. "So tell me."

He drained the rest of his glass and set it on his oiled end table. "I can keep eyes on you, Mr. Croft, but not at all hours. It seems your domicile is rather well protected, and you have that exquisite feline watching the street. After observing the dramatic lengths you and your partner just undertook in attempting to bypass the Wall, it occurred to me that you might agree to stay away from Ferguson Towers but still advise the detective from afar. And with that bit of insight, a more superior solution came to my mind."

"Oh, and what's that?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

"Put my last warning out of your head. You're back on the case."

"Huh?"

"However." Arnaud held up a finger. "Your instructions are now to mislead the detective." I was already shaking my head when he added, "Send her on a wild goose chase."

"Forget it."

"The alternative is to have her removed from the investigation. And though I suppose I could tug certain strings to make that happen, someone would just step into her place." Arnaud seemed to be talking to himself before redirecting his voice back at me. "And then we'd be back to square one, wouldn't we? Frankly, Mr. Croft, I'm too busy to meddle in such matters."

The thought of misleading Vega struck me as wrong in so many ways. "I'm not doing that."

"Oh, I think you will, Mr. Croft," Arnaud said.

"And why's that?"

"Because Detective Vega has a young child. And your humanity will prevent you from carrying out any foolishness that would lead to his disappearance. Such as contradicting my directive."

His words hit me like a fist in the face. "You wouldn't," I growled.

He smiled.

"You son of a bitch."

"Oh, come now," Arnaud said, eyes gleaming. "We were getting along so pleasantly."

"I'll… I'll…" But in the muddy atmosphere of the room, I couldn't complete the sentence, much less the thought.

"It seems you need some fresh air, Mr. Croft. But before you return outside, do we have an agreement? Or would you rather have to explain to the detective why her son is imperiled?"

That was the reason for the opiate. To make an impossible offer and then prevent me from thinking clearly enough to see my way through it. Blasting him with the ring was out of the question, though I was damn sure tempted. That would only earn me—and probably Vega—a bloody date with Death.

"What am I supposed to tell her?" I asked.

Without taking his eyes from mine, Arnaud said, "Zarko, I've written something on the blotter on my desk. Could you bring it here?" A moment later, he reached back and accepted a folded piece of paper from his head blood slave. "You will begin by telling the detective that I warned you away last night out of concern for your safety. After all, your grandfather and I go back many centuries, and I feel a certain *tenderness* toward his descendants." He grinned as though at a clever joke, then rattled the paper softly. "I have here a name and an address. Someone who, you will tell the detective, I feel may have information as to the killer's identity and whereabouts. I want you to visit him together. I am supplying this information in exchange for the assurance that I will no longer be questioned on the matter." He raised his pale eyebrows. "Are we agreed, Mr. Croft?"

Though I'd been beating my thoughts around for the last minute, trying to resuscitate them, they would only coalesce around the photo on Detective Vega's desk of her and her young son.

"Mr. Croft?" Arnaud said.

"Just give it to me."

"I'll take that as a *yes*." Arnaud placed the paper into my groping hand. "I will be watching to ensure you share this information post haste. And if you tip the detective off to our agreement, I will know that as well."

"How?" I challenged.

"Changes in the detective's behavior, the patterns she sets for her son, extra protection, so forth and so on. I have little patience for such duplicity and will show even less mercy. Do not test me there, Mr. Croft. Keep the detective occupied with what I have given you. If there is any additional information I wish to impart, I will have one of my men deliver it to you. Are we on the same page?"

I couldn't take the atmosphere any longer. My head was dizzy and pounding. I stood, the paper clutched in one hand, and staggered toward the door.

"And Mr. Croft," he called after me. I turned at the doorway to find Arnaud standing from his chair. "I like to think I can offer treats and not merely threats, so I'll say something else. Should this…" He circled a hand as though in search of the right word. "…*arrangemen*t conclude to the satisfaction of all concerned, there may be something in it for you."

"I don't want your stinking money," I mumbled.

"Money?" He chuckled. "Oh, no. I'm talking about something far more valuable, Mr. Croft. Information."

The angle of his voice made me hesitate. "Such as…?"

"Such as what became of your dear mother."

I stopped breathing. "What?"

"That will be waiting for you on the other side. Consider it a blood deal."

I took two heavy steps toward Arnaud before Zarko gripped my arm and steered me toward the door. Though I struggled, I was no match for his strength. A moment later I stumbled into the hallway, the slaves who had brought me up already guiding me toward the elevator.

I looked at the folded-over piece of paper, then back at Arnaud's closed door feeling like I'd been offered a deal by the devil himself.

And goddammit, I knew I had to take it.

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I rooted around in Vega's glove compartment until I found the aspirin bottle. My head hurt like hell, and it wasn't only from the toxicity of Arnaud's office. It was from just feeding Vega the crap about the person on the piece of paper, Sonny Shoat, being a potential lead. It was from not being able to tell her about the threat to her son, or about the promise Arnaud had made to tell me what had happened to my mother, who had died when I was one.

I shook two bitter tablets into my mouth, chewed and swallowed them dry, and then leaned my head back against the rest.

"Why is he insisting you come with me?" Vega asked.

"I don't know," I said, eyes closed. I couldn't look her in the face. "It was just one of his conditions for doling out information."

"He has more?"

Yeah, more to mislead you. "He suggested he might."

"What the hell? Does he think this is some kind of game?"

"Probably."

Vega cussed again, and I felt the car cut hard in and out of several lanes before she turned left. "I have some things to do at the office, including finding out what I can about this Sonny Shoat, and then I need to talk to Stiles, make sure he's still good on our deal. I'll drop you at your place and call you later."

"Fine by me."

Besides needing to sort out my thoughts, I wanted to get a hold of Caroline. With the vampire's opiate leaving my system, my wizard's intuition was tapping the base of my skull again, telling me something was off.

"THERE WERE NO CALLS," Tabitha said languidly from her divan.

I shushed her as I finished dialing my voice mail service. But she was right. Zero messages.

I thumbed the switch hook for a fresh dial tone and then spun Caroline's number. As had happened last night and this morning, the

call went straight to her recorded voice: *"Hi, you've reached Caroline Reid. I'm sorry I'm not here to take your call…"*

I waited out the rest of the message, then cleared my throat.

"Hey, Caroline. It's Everson again. Look, I'm getting a little worried here, so if you could call me as soon as you get this, I'd really appreciate it." I could understand her turning her phone off for the night, but it was two in the afternoon.

I leaned my arms against the kitchen counter, my sternum and jaw aching from my encounter at the checkpoint, my head pounding from my meeting with Arnaud, and now my stomach in nervous knots for Caroline. And I had been planning to spend my spring-break week in a bathrobe and furry slippers, catching up on some arcane reading while sipping artisan coffee.

A bout of hard knocking shook the door.

I raised my head. Did I even want to answer that?

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Tabitha said. "I caught a couple of men watching the building. They disappeared when you showed up with the detective."

"You know, that probably should have been the first thing you told me when I came through the door."

"No-o-o, I was supposed to say 'welcome home,' which I did. I then started to ask why your face looked like a walnut, but I caught myself and asked if you were all right. Also like you told me. The information about the men watching the building must have gotten lost in your labyrinth of etiquette."

"Never mind." I pushed myself from the counter and walked warily toward the door. The men were probably blood slaves sent by Arnaud, maybe to ensure I was fulfilling my end of the bargain. As long as I remained on my side of the threshold, I was safe. The power of my wards, which I had spent the last six months rebuilding, would keep them out.

"Were they dressed in suits?" I asked.

"Long coats and hats," Tabitha replied. "But they didn't look like male models."

I lifted my cane from the coat rack beside the door and peered through the peep hole. I saw what Tabitha meant. The men in the hallway weren't blood slaves. If anything, they looked like something out of 1920s New York, in their Homburg hats and knee-length wool coats.

The two men glanced around impatiently. The larger one in the fore knocked again.

I twisted the three bolts open and cracked the door. "Yes?"

"You Everson Croft?" the knocker asked.

"And you are…?"

“I’m Floyd and this is Whitey, my associate. We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

I studied Floyd, with his stout frame and dark eyes that moved back and forth over mine. Whitey was much thinner, with white hair and pale eyes that looked everywhere but at me.

“Can we come in?” When Floyd saw my hesitation, he added, “It’s about your friend, Caroline.”

A charge went through my chest. “What’s going on? Has something happened?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” I said quickly, opening the door and gesturing toward the sitting area.

In the shock of hearing Caroline’s name, I hadn’t thought to ask who they were. Some part of my mind had slotted “Detective” before their names, but the men hadn’t flashed badges. And why would they have hidden from Vega when we pulled up? Then the familiar-sounding names clicked.

Oh, crap.

I wheeled in time for a brass-knuckled fist to plow into my jaw. Already weakened from my sparring session at the checkpoint, my chin crumpled in a rude spear of light, and I dropped straight down. Floyd and Whitey were members of the city’s Italian crime syndicate. Moretti’s men.

I went to raise my cane, but it had tumbled from my grasp. And my casting prism was shot.

Floyd squatted beside me, near enough that I could smell his cold aftershave. “Now that I’ve got your attention,” he said in a whisper that managed to sound intimate and menacing at the same time, “you want to tell me where she is?”

Beyond him, Whitey had closed the door and drawn a vintage Colt pistol, his pale eyes flicking around the apartment. I couldn’t see Tabitha, but I hoped she had enough sense to keep her head down.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, blood trickling into my throat.

“Caroline was your date last night, wasn’t she?”

How did he know that? “A provisional date. It was something we were trying out.” When Floyd’s face wrinkled in confusion, I started again. “Yeah, yeah, we met up at a fundraiser for the mayor.”

“So where’d you take her after?”

“After? I didn’t.”

Floyd peered up at Whitey as if to say, “Can you believe this guy?” then turned and cracked his brass-knuckled fist against my face again. A flash lit up my right eye and spread into a bruising throb. But Caroline’s wellbeing was my immediate concern, not the state of my

face.

"Eyewitnesses saw you leave with her," Floyd said.

"What?" I felt like I was in a Twilight Zone episode. Then I remembered the apartment building's concierge, Javier. "Wait, wait, ask the guy who works the door. He saw her leave."

"He was one of the witnesses," Floyd said from over me.

"The hell he was. When I talked to him last night, he told me she left alone…" My counterargument trailed off as I realized that's not what Javier had said. Not exactly. I replayed the odd exchange in my mind.

Did she leave with someone else?

What you mean, Mr. Croft?

I mean, did a man escort her out?

You mean someone else?

That's right, someone else.

No-o-o-o?

Christ. Javier's confusion hadn't stemmed from a language barrier, but from the belief he'd seen her leave with *me*. I thought of Angelus and fae powers, namely glamours. The son of a bitch could have assumed my likeness for others to see, but without Caroline necessarily knowing. Hot anger broke through me at the idea. I would find her, but first I had to get rid of these guys.

"I have an alibi," I said.

"Oh, yeah?" Floyd's lips tightened into a smile. "Hear that, Whitey? Lover boy here's got an alibi."

"Homicide," I said. "I was consulting on a case for the NYPD. I left the party around 9:30 and didn't get back until after it was over. Detective Vega will confirm that. I believe you just saw her outside?"

That seemed to give Floyd pause.

"Look," I said. "When I left, Caroline was talking to a guy named Angelus. Six foot five or so, dark blond hair, a face you want to smash, it's so damn perfect."

"That don't sound like someone who would be mistaken for you," Floyd said.

"Yeah, no kidding."

Floyd sighed from his haunches and looked up at Whitey. Some sort of nonverbal communication seemed to pass between them. At last, Floyd nodded and straightened. "We're gonna look into your alibi," he said, staring down at me. "But I'm gonna tell you something right now: we find out you're fibbing, and what happened here today's gonna seem like a beach vacation. And don't even think about running. Not unless you want both your legs broken."

"Great," I said. "You enjoy the rest of your day, too."

Floyd shook his head and followed Whitey out. I gained my feet

and locked the door behind them.

"And that's exactly why I have you tour the ledge," I called back to Tabitha.

"Did you say something, darling?" When I turned, Tabitha was lifting her head from her paws, blinking slowly. "What did those men want?"

"You slept through all of that?"

"It didn't sound like it was going to be very interesting." Tabitha yawned. "Is that blood on your mouth?"

I wiped my bottom lip with the back of a hand and retrieved my cane. "Forget it."

I wasn't going to get into it with my cat. Touching my cane to my hurt places, I uttered healing incantations. I needed to be at full strength. Caroline was missing, and the Italian mob was interested for some reason. Which meant it was time to dial up some magic.

In my library/lab, I took the slip of paper onto which Caroline had written the address for last night's gala, aimed my cane at it, and spoke an incantation. White light bloomed from the opal, absorbing Caroline's essence from her writing.

Without warning, the cane kicked in my hand. It spun me in a complete three-hundred-sixty-degree circle before the opal's light faltered and went dim. The cane took on a ponderous weight.

"Again?" I groaned.

I pushed more energy into the incantation, already knowing it was a lost cause. Like the salt barrier, something was coming between the item and my target. But in this case I suspected fae magic.

I didn't know where in the city the fae lived. They were secretive, like I'd said. But I knew someone who might be able to point me in the right direction.

Even if she was a night hag.

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"*Soglia,*" I whispered, aligning my mind with my apartment's defenses—defenses designed to keep out nasty supernaturals. But now I needed to let one in. Not only that, I would be setting out the equivalent of a piece of cheese as bait. I shuddered at the thought, but if I was going to learn anything about the fae in the city, and fast, I had little choice.

From my pocket, I pulled out a piece of black lava rock—an element to which night hags had an affinity—uttered "*Aprire,*" and set the rock on the floor before the door. The threshold's energy hit the stone's shadowy aura and coursed over it, creating a small hole in my home's defenses.

In the back of the fridge, I found an expired carton of milk. I counted to three, then glugged it down. My stomach shook and burbled, drowning in the spoiled milk. I needed to make my sleep as unpleasant as possible—more night hag bait.

"I'm going to sack out for a bit," I told Tabitha when my stomach had settled to a dull nausea. "If you hear me moaning or thrashing around for more than a few minutes, could you come and wake me?"

"Sure, darling."

As if she would be staying awake herself.

I closed the shades and crawled into bed, lying down on my back. Not wanting my protective necklace to act as a deterrent, I turned it around so that the coin hung between my shoulder blades. I then straightened my arms and legs and tried to clear my thoughts. After a few moments, my awareness began to crumble and break apart.

I WAS in a forest of tall trees, a child, and I was lost. I peered around, frightened by the sameness. Moving in any direction would only plunge me deeper into the forest, to a place no one would find me. And then night would fall, and the creatures would come out.

"Mom!" I cried in a thin, straining voice.

I had never called to her before. Nana, the woman who had raised

me, had always been the soother of my scraped knees and hurt feelings. But I had a clear image of my mother, a photo in our old living room of her standing beside a window, light paling one half of her face, lost in thought. Now, an urgent tugging on my heart told me she was the only one who could lead me from here.

"Mom! Help me!"

Footsteps approached from behind. I turned and beheld the beautiful woman from the photo. Same light-brown hair brushed over one shoulder, same sad smile, same soft eyes. Only now they were looking at me.

"Mom!" I ran forward and threw my arms around her leg, pressing my cheek to the pleasant-smelling fabric of her slacks.

Her hand brushed my hair. "What's wrong, Everson?"

I sniffled. "I was lost."

She laughed softly. "Well, I found you, didn't I? I'll always find you."

"How do we get out of here?"

"I can point the way, but I'm going to need you to be a brave boy and make the journey yourself. Can you do that?"

I clung to her more tightly. But a chill wind cut through me, and her slacks suddenly turned ragged and rancid. Her thigh, so soft a moment ago, became a bony ridge, hard against my cheek. The hand stroking my hair began to hook and pull. I leaned my face back and let out a hoarse scream. My mother was gone, replaced by an old woman with a long, crooked nose and wild shocks of gray hair.

"What's wrong, Everson?" she cackled.

"No!" I wheeled to run, but the woman caught my wrist in a withered hand and yanked me back.

"Leaving so soon?" she said. "I wouldn't think of it, a handsome young boy like you."

"Stop!" I beat at her hand. "Let me go!"

When the necklace that hung between the woman's baggy breasts shook with delighted laughter, I saw that it was made of small bones. Children's bones.

"Let you go?" she asked. "Like this?"

I had been leaning back, and when she released my wrist I fell onto the rotten leaves. As I kicked myself away, the old woman lit up with more cackles, her mouth a graveyard of broken teeth.

"Stop," I pled. "Leave me alone."

"But don't you want to play with the other children?" she asked, stalking after me. She pulled a dripping leather bag from a cord that cinched her waist and opened it toward me. From deep inside came a chorus of screams, the sound drawing ice-cold nails across my soul. "There are so many, Everson. And they're always anxious for new

playmates. Jump inside. Don't be shy."

This was a night hag, I realized. They visited their victims in nightmares, torturing their dream forms before stuffing them into a bag made out of stitched human skin. With enough visits, the sleeping victim would die.

And with that, I realized *I* was dreaming.

I fought to remember the chain of events that had delivered me here: creating a seam for the hag, calling her to my space with the lava rock, drinking sour milk to invoke the nightmare.

"Back off."

Even though my voice sounded more adult, I was still scared witless. I struggled through the wet leaves, away from the nightmare creature bearing down on me with that awful sack. And then I felt the hard edges of something between my shoulder blades.

My necklace!

I dove a dream hand behind my neck. But before I could claim the powerful charm, the night hag took a giant leap. Her gnarly feet landed on my torso, pinning my arm beneath me. With a snarl, she crawled her hooked toes forward, the horny black nails gouging the skin of my chest.

"You're going to join the other children," she said, "and you're going to enjoy yourself."

I tried to worm my fingers farther down my back—I was only inches from the coin—but they wouldn't budge. I tried to buck my body and shove the hag off me, but I couldn't move. The hag's weight on my chest had paralyzed me. Her eyes, once rolling with delight, sharpened to the malevolent blades of the criminally insane.

I listened for Tabitha, hoping she had heard me scream.

"Such a handsome-looking nose." The night hag licked her sore-riddled lips with a black tongue. "I don't suppose a little taste would hurt, hmm?"

She leaned lower, teeth drawing apart. A smell of bloating and decomposition broke against my face.

Might not be able to seize my charmed coin, I thought, *but I can still cast through it.*

I stopped struggling and focused on the coin's symbol, squares offset to create a star-like pattern, lines to channel and focus energy. It pulsed like a warming ember beneath my back.

"So delicious." Her tongue scraped along the bridge of my nose.

"Respingere," I mumbled.

The force discharged through my dream body. It crashed against the hag's chest like a fist, blue fire breaking briefly around the impact as she was thrown from me. She landed hard on her back. The paralysis broken, I sat up and pulled my necklace over my head, the

heavy coin clenched in my palm.

The hag let out a withering scream. “You little bastard!”

She scrambled to her feet, jerked the dripping sack from her belt, and charged, fresh screams rising from the sack’s mouth. She opened the sack wider until it looked large enough to swallow me.

I held out the glowing coin and bellowed, *“Intrappolare.”*

A shaft of blue light slammed into the onrushing creature. She screamed as the force knocked her from her feet. I advanced, angling the amulet to direct the light over her, pinning her to the forest floor.

I had my night hag.

“Release me!” she screamed. “Release me, curse you!”

“I have a few questions first.”

Spitting, she writhed against the force and wrung her sack.

I channeled more energy through the coin. “I can do this all day, you know.”

She relented suddenly, her voice becoming a frail whimper. “You would torment an old woman?”

“You mean the one who just tried to eat my nose?”

Her face curled up again. “What do you want?” she spat.

“You’re not a faerie, but you roam the wilds of their realm. You’re aware of their comings and goings.”

“What of it!”

“I’m looking for a particular fae. He goes by the name Angelus.”

Her eyes showed a brief glint of recognition. “I know no one by that name.”

I shrugged and leaned against a tree. “How long we do this is up to you.”

“No, mortal.” Her lips wrinkled into a grin. “I have only to wait for you to awaken.”

“I’ll destroy you before that happens.”

She cackled. “You haven’t the power.”

“Oh?” I pushed more energy through the charmed coin. The shaft of light pinning the hag turned bright.

“Owww!” she howled, covering her head with her bony arms.

I backed off. “That’s just a taste,” I lied. I had pushed hard enough to make Thelonious stir. “Now tell me about Angelus.”

She lowered her arms with a scowl. “What about him?”

“First, who is he?”

“He’s a *prince*.” Her lips puckered around the word.

“In the faerie realm?” I thought about that. The fae didn’t carry royal titles in the city. They were more like the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers: old, wealthy families, but without the name recognition, which was how they seemed to like it. “What does he do in the city? Where does he live?”

“How should I know?”

“I’ve seen you pushing your shopping cart up and down the sidewalks. How many centuries have you been in New York? And you’re going to sit there and tell me you have no idea what a prince from your realm does in the city or where he lives?”

“I don’t know what he does.”

I upped the energy until her warts began to sizzle and burst.

“I don’t!” she insisted. “But he lives near the Park.”

“Where near the Park?”

“East Side! Seventieth Street! Now release me!”

I eyed the hideous creature. Stealer of souls, robber of cradles. I *could* try to destroy her, but that would mean expending energy that might not even be sufficient to the task. And if Thelonious made a visit, things would go from very bad to much worse. No, I couldn’t risk it.

“Fine,” I said, pulling power from the coin. “I release you.”

The hag growled and gained her feet. I eyed her loose grip on her sack.

“Liberare!” I cried, thrusting the coin toward it. The force tore the sack from her grasp and flipped it, releasing the trapped souls. They streamed away, like celestial eels into a great ocean.

“Nooo!” the night hag shrieked. “Come back! Don’t run away!”

The night hag grabbed her sack and ran after the streaming souls, leaping up in fruitless attempts to reclaim them. She soon became lost among the trees, her wretched cries trailing after her.

And I had an address.

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I stepped from the cab where Seventieth Street met Central Park, flipping up my jacket collar to block the cold wind. The street the night hag had given me was in one of the city's wealthier pockets, though something told me I wouldn't find the fae in any of the ornate towers facing the Park. That would be too obvious.

Opening my senses, I headed east at a fast walk, dodging New Yorkers in thick hats and scarves, while eyeing the passing buildings. Though none featured ethereal auras, I began to pick up a low white noise after several blocks, like soft static. The static grew as I hastened my pace—then it receded. I backed up until I was standing where the static was at its peak. I found myself beside a stone staircase leading up to an emerald-green door. Somehow I had missed both just a few seconds before.

A subtle, intricate magic was at play, blending the edifice with the buildings on either side so it wouldn't stand out. Only a steady eye brought the door into full focus. I moved my gaze up the narrow townhouse, counting four floors, each with a window and simple decorative balcony.

Yes, this was the place.

I climbed the steps. Finding no bell, I knocked on the door, the dense wood seeming to swallow the sound. But a moment later, the door opened onto a slight man in traditional butler's attire, silver hair combed to one side. Though he appeared fully human, I immediately recognized him as a fae. His aura was calmer than Angel's, tempered by age, but not weaker.

Definitely not weaker.

If he was surprised to see me—or anyone—at his door, the emotion remained folded in a drawer behind his placid face. I tried to peer past him, but against the light from outside, the space registered dimly, perhaps from another veiling. All I could make out was the beginning of parquet hallway, too wide, it seemed, to fit inside the narrow building.

The butler cleared his throat. "Yes?"

I decided to forego etiquette. "Where's Angelus?"

"I'm afraid he's not in, sir."

"Where is he?"

"I couldn't tell you." His gray eyes, which seemed to eddy at their depths with ancient knowledge, gave up nothing.

"I need to talk to him."

"It would appear so."

"Listen," I said, fighting to control my voice, "Angelus left a party with a friend of mine last night, and no one's seen her since. Do you know anything about that?"

"Angelus isn't in, sir," he repeated.

His head turned slightly. Somewhere behind him a door opened, and an impossible number of voices spilled into the hallway before the door closed again. How many people were back there? Was Caroline among them?

"I'm sorry, sir," the butler said, "but I must return to my duties."

"No, wait." I went to jam a foot against the closing door, but a force kicked it back out. A threshold.

"Good day, sir." He closed the door.

I tried the knob then pounded on the door. When it didn't open again, I descended to the sidewalk and peered up at the townhouse. If Caroline was inside, it would explain why my tracking spell had fizzled out as well as why her phone couldn't receive a signal, the protective energies of the building breaking apart both.

I balled my hands into helpless fists. The defenses here were too complex for someone of my wizarding grade. Even the butler seemed to know this, regarding me more as a minor nuisance than a threat. I considered appealing to the Order to intervene, but I knew that had about as high a probability of getting a response as winning the New York lottery.

The pager in my pocket began to vibrate. Vega was probably ready to follow up on Arnaud's bogus lead. I left the townhouse in search of a payphone, eventually finding one on Third Avenue.

"What's up?" I asked when Vega answered.

"There's a diner two blocks from Ferguson Towers called Firpo's. How soon can you be here?"

"Why? What's going on?"

"We have some new information."

My heart sped up as I thought of Arnaud's threat against her son. Neither Vega nor I could be seen poking around Ferguson Towers. "Well, ah, what about our interview with Sonny?" I stammered.

"That can wait."

I looked around desperately, torn between keeping Vega and her son safe and finding Caroline.

"Croft," Vega said sternly.

"Uh, fine. I'll catch a cab here in a minute."

She hung up.

I wheeled from the phone booth and found myself face to face with the blond blood slave. “Geez.” I pressed my hand to my slamming heart. “Do you have to sneak up on me like that?”

“Get her away from the Towers,” he said.

I was preparing to play dumb before realizing that, with his preternatural hearing, Blondie had heard every word on Vega’s end of the conversation. He reached into a jacket pocket and held up a smartphone, the crisp image of a young boy at play on its screen: Vega’s son.

“That was taken two minutes ago in a Brooklyn park,” Blondie said. “I hear his sitter has a bad habit of texting when she should be keeping an eye on him. All I have to do is give the word.”

I shouldered him aside and waved for a taxi.

“Don’t,” I said. “I’ll get her out of there.”

I FOUND Vega in a booth in the back corner of the dimly-lit diner. She was talking to someone across from her, the back of the booth blocking the person from view. As I approached, a pair of wringing hands slid into my line of sight, then thick arms, and at last a hulking body, the squat head swiveling to face me. I pulled up short. What in the hell was one of Stiles’s henchmen doing here?

“Thanks for coming,” Vega said. “This is Rancho.”

When my eyes slid back to the henchman, the one whom I’d dubbed the Mexican Wrestler, I half expected him to be reaching for a weapon. Instead, Rancho offered his right hand, his expression either fearful or earnest, I couldn’t tell. His palm was damp when we shook. Vega scooted over to make room for me, and I joined her opposite Rancho.

“So what’s up?” I asked, looking between them.

“Rancho has something to share,” Vega said. “Go on, tell him what you told me.”

“I’m not supposed to be talking,” Rancho said in a half-whisper, peering around the side of the booth. Besides being dimly lit, the hazy diner was empty. “If Stiles finds out…”

“Everything you say is confidential,” Vega said impatiently. “And I’m telling you that as an old friend.”

Rancho hunched his shoulders and pushed around his coffee mug with a finger. “I’m Stiles’s number two. I run security in the east towers and have a dozen guys patrolling for me. Every night around midnight, I do my own patrol. Make sure no one’s where they shouldn’t be, you know?” He wasn’t talking about the security of the

residents, I understood, but the security of Stiles's drug operation. His job was to keep Kahn's sellers out of the east towers. "Anyway, I'm doing the tour of the lower levels. Pit Stop and Bones are down there."

"The victims," Vega told me. "Before they became victims."

"Yeah, they're not supposed to be down there," Rancho went on, "but they're whacked out pretty good, and I'm not gonna pick 'em up and carry 'em out, you know? So I keep going, and I'm getting this feeling like someone's watching me. And I'm hearing things. Breathing. Something moving. But too big to be a rat, you know? And it's bothering me, 'cause except for where my flashlight's pointing it's pitch black down there. So I give the room a sweep, and I swear to God, something's moving just outside of my light, quick as fuck."

"Did you get a look at what?" I asked.

"For a blink, yeah," Rancho whispered. "Cause when my light forced it into a corner, the thing came at me. I mean, one second it's back behind the pipes, and the next it's almost on top of me. I caught a face, white as this coffee mug, and wild hair, and a mouthful of teeth." Rancho arranged his shaking hands so he was holding an invisible gun. "I squeezed twice—bam! bam!—and got the fuck out of there."

"Those bullet casings we found?" Vega said to me, raising an eyebrow.

"And he didn't come after you?" I asked, the fact striking me as unusual.

"He?" Rancho shook his head. "That was no dude."

"What do you mean?"

"That's why Stiles thinks it's one of Kahn's," Rancho said. "Some of his runners are women. Stiles ordered me to go back down, to make sure I'd finished her off. But there was no way I was gonna have that thing come at me again. And just so you know," he said, leaning forward to look me in the eyes, "I've dealt with some of the baddest mothers out there. Been stabbed, shot, bottles broken over my head—shit don't scare me. But that thing in the basement…" His next breath rattled out of him. "I'm telling you, she wasn't one of Kahn's. She wasn't even a person."

Vega nudged my leg twice under the table, as though to say *blood slave.*

"So you lied to Stiles about going back down?" I said.

"Yeah, and the next day Pit Stop and Bones are torn to shit."

I chewed on that for a moment. "Did any of your people see her come or go?"

"No one saw nothing," Rancho said. "And we keep eyes on our doors twenty-four seven."

I remembered the drain Vega had checked out in the boiler room

and thought back to what I'd read about blood slaves lairing near their prey.

"I talked with Stiles earlier," Vega said to me. "Son of a bitch is on a power trip. Isn't going to let us take another look at the crime scene. Doesn't want us anywhere near *his* towers, as he calls them."

I felt the tension ease out of my shoulders. *That's a relief.*

"But I sent Hoffman out to track down the plans for the buildings," she said. "See if there are any other access points to the lower level."

"While Hoffman is working on that," I said quickly, "maybe we should head over to that interview in midtown." *And get both of us far, far away from Ferguson Towers.*

"Wait," Vega said. "Rancho's got something else."

The hulking man peeked around the edge of the booth again, then hunched his head even lower. "Stiles isn't going to give you a week. He just wanted to let that get around so Kahn would lower his guard."

"He's planning something?" I asked.

"Yeah, and it ain't gonna be a tit for tat. He's going big."

"How big?"

"Taking out Kahn big."

"When?" I asked.

"Two nights from now. Man, if he knows I'm telling you this, he'll waste me. But I've got a family in there. I've got kids to look out for. My baby girl just turned two. You should see her face when I walk in the door. Just lights right up. No judgment or nothing." A softness took hold in Rancho's coal-black eyes. "I'd die before I let her catch a stray bullet—or missile."

I tried to picture the three-hundred pound monstrosity tossing a little girl up and down and blowing raspberries against her belly.

"Thanks, Rancho," Vega said, setting a few twenties in front of him, probably out of her own pocket.

"I didn't talk for the money," Rancho said. "I'm talking because I need you guys' help. I'm asking you to catch whatever the fuck that thing is and show it to Stiles. You know what he's like, Ricki. Once he gets a notion, God and Satan can't knock it out of his head."

"We're doing everything we can," Vega said, her hip-check my cue to slide from the booth. "But keep the money. Buy something for your little girl. We may need you for more than just info next time."

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"Something wrong?" Vega asked from behind the wheel.

As we'd left the diner, I had caught two of Arnaud's blood slaves watching from down the street. I had no idea whether I'd gotten Vega out of there fast enough. For all I knew, her son was now missing, his sitter searching the playground, calling his name in ever-growing distress. That would be on me. I let myself become too interested in Rancho's story when I should have been urging Vega to leave. I guess my face looked as stricken as I felt.

"Just thinking about a friend," I said, switching from one track of worry to another. "She left a party last night with someone, and no one's seen her since. I can't get her on the phone."

"Maybe she doesn't want to be found," Vega said.

I'd thought about that, especially with the Italian mob looking for her. "Maybe," I agreed. "But could you check and see if anyone's filled out a missing persons report on her?"

"What's the name?"

"Caroline Reid."

She pulled out her smartphone, making her steering more haphazard. After a few queries, much of it in police jargon, she said, "Thanks," and hung up. "A report went out around noon," she told me.

"Who filed the report?"

"Didn't say."

Probably her father. I considered having Vega relay the info about the fae house on East Seventieth Street to Missing Persons, then decided against it, my brain a switchboard of conflicting signals.

I massaged my aching temples.

"Goddamn Stiles," Vega seethed. I turned to find her white-knuckling the steering wheel, eyes staring spears at the road ahead. "I knew he was gonna pull some kind of shit, but saying he'd give us time just so he could give himself an advantage against Kahn?" She faced me, a pair of fingers held up. "Two nights, Croft. We've got two nights to wrap this up."

"Maybe this lead will turn into something."

"Coming from Arnaud?" Vega snorted. "I may not know any

vampires, but I know the type."

"What do you mean?"

"A person of interest wanting to aim the spotlight anywhere but at himself. They give us bad info all the time. I'm much more interested in the building plans for the Towers, learning how that thing got in and out."

"Were you able to find out anything about Sonny Shoat?"

"Yeah, the man's a real prince." She gave me a sidelong look. "For the last thirty years he's been running a club near Times Square. A seedy joint called *Seductions*. Man's been in and out of custody, mostly for drugs and beating up on his girls."

I felt my jaw steeling. I could forgive a lot, but not preying on women or children.

"So we'll go in there," Vega said, "let him deny knowing anything, and then we'll get back to figuring out how that blood slave accessed the tower."

I was trying to come up with something to divert Vega from her plan when her phone beeped. She looked at a text message on the display, typed something back, and returned the phone to her jacket pocket.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"Just my sitter saying they're back at the apartment."

Kid's safe, I thought, relaxing into the seat. *But for how much longer?*

SONNY'S graying hair hung like damp drapes around a gaunt, predatory face. Underneath a leather vest, he went shirtless, like the women he employed.

"A murder, you say?" He set a booted foot against his metal desk and tipped himself back, hands clasped behind his head. I could just make out his rat-like eyes studying us from behind a pair of sunglasses, his left lid jittering up and down. But it was his canines I was more interested in. Arnaud had sent us to another vampire. "No, don't know anything about that."

"It happened in the basement of Ferguson Towers," Vega said in the monotone of someone just going through the motions. "The two victims had their throats slashed."

Sonny's narrow nose let out a snivel. "Sounds like you've got a killer on your hands."

"Really," Vega said flatly. "And you don't have any information for us?"

"Why would I?"

"We're following up on a lead," she said.

Sonny dropped his chair and leaned over his desk. "Then you've been misled."

"No shit," she muttered under her breath, cutting her eyes to me as though to say, *Had enough of this dirt bag?*

But before she could stand, I placed a hand on her forearm. Sonny wasn't as pale as the creature Rancho had described, but I couldn't ignore his long hair—or the fact he would have employed hundreds of women over the years, maybe even made blood slaves out of a few of them.

"I imagine the turnover in your line of work is pretty high," I said.

"No flies on you," Sonny replied with a tired smile, front teeth glinting gold. "Just when you get them pulling in real money, too. They forget who *made* them that money, you know?" He turned toward the closed door that led onto the club, a den of black lights, thumping music, and sinuous, sweating bodies. Detective Vega hadn't been thrilled about having to walk through the club to get to the office. Neither had I, to be honest.

"Did any of them leave here with an appetite for blood?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sonny's gaze snapped back to mine, his left eyelid jittering faster. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do."

Sonny waved a hand of sharpened nails. "Once they leave, the girls aren't my business anymore."

In my peripheral vision, I could see Vega's gaze moving between us, brow furrowed, no doubt wondering where in the hell the interview was going. I wasn't sure myself. But I was getting the impression that if I could rattle Sonny hard enough, something useful might fall out.

"You're familiar with the big investment bankers downtown, right?" I asked.

"What about them?"

"They like a certain degree of invisibility, don't they? I mean, in terms of who they are?"

Sonny wet his lips with a pale tongue.

"It just strikes me that if they thought you were being, I don't know, *careless* with your women, they might decide to come uptown and have a word with you."

"Look, man," Sonny said, a note of fear entering his voice. I could feel cold power radiating from him, but it didn't compare to Arnaud's. A fact Sonny must have known too. "I hear what you're saying, but I don't do that to my girls. I don't turn them into anything."

At that moment, music burst through the opening door. A ginger-

haired woman in glittering red shoes and a matching thong stepped into the office, her curves bared to the world.

"Sorry," she said between smacks of gum. "Didn't know you had visitors."

"No, I'm glad you came," Sonny said. He scooted back and patted his thighs. "Come over here, sugar. Have a seat."

She did as he said and plopped onto his lap, her mascara-lined eyes regarding us with utter disinterest.

"How long have you been with me, Casey?"

"I dunno." She shrugged. "Fifteen years?"

"Nineteen, sugar." He stroked her cheek with a long nail, sending chills through me. Everything about the vampire repulsed me. He cut his eyes to mine. "Nineteen years, and look at her. A hundred percent flesh and blood."

He was right. She exhibited none of the waxiness of a blood slave. And though her eyes verged on lifeless, I suspected that had more to do with a combination of drug use and regular blood draws. I studied Casey's neck and arms for marks. Sonny apparently caught on to what I was doing.

"You think I'd damage the merchandise?" he asked with a laugh. "Casey, show the man your ticklish spot."

"Now?" she said.

"Go on."

With a sigh, Casey set a high heel on the desktop and undid the thick strap across the top of her foot. She peeled back the strap to reveal red punctures in the scarred skin—Sonny's watering hole.

"You see," he said. "I only take enough to keep me going, nothing more."

He brushed a thumb over the years' worth of punctures as though they were a work of art. Casey wriggled and let out a giggle. Sonny's eyes suddenly narrowed, and he shoved her off him.

"Hey!" She stumbled and braced herself against the wall, balancing on one high heel to refasten the loose strap on the other.

"Get back out there," Sonny barked. "You're not making any money in here."

"And you are?" she shot back.

In a flash, Sonny was on his feet. I didn't know what his intentions were—maybe just to yell some more—but seeing Casey flinch away was enough. I slammed Sonny into the wall and tackled him to the floor. A dry erase board with the dancers' schedules clattered on top of us. Sonny was stronger and faster than me, but I had caught him off guard. Before he could wrestle free, I yanked his head back by the hair and shoved Grandpa's ring against his throat.

"You might not know what this is," I said between gritted teeth.

“But I know you can feel its power.”

Sonny’s shades were hanging from one ear, and his naked eyes seethed red. “I can destroy you, human,” he hissed, a second set of spiny teeth growing through his gums.

“The ring will destroy you first.”

“Get up,” Vega said, pulling the dry erase board away. “Both of you.”

Sonny’s eyes shifted to where she was standing over him, her pistol aimed down at his head. Her standard-issue bullets wouldn’t kill him, but they would hurt like hell until he could reconstitute his form. Sonny must have decided it wasn’t worth the hassle. He retracted his teeth and showed his palms.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “You said this was gonna be an informal interview.”

I got up and moved back, keeping my ring trained on him. He fixed his sunglasses as he stood, then gave his hair a light toss. When he noticed Casey still in his office, he flicked his hand.

“Go on, sugar,” he said gently. “Back to work, huh?”

Thrusting her chest out defiantly, Casey turned and marched from the office, as though leaving of her own initiative. “Asshole,” she said before the door closed behind her.

“Bitch,” Sonny grumbled as he returned to his desk and sat down hard. “Always had a mouth on her. Probably getting too old for this gig, anyway.”

Vega holstered her weapon and dropped a card in front of him. “If you decide you know anything about those murders, you give us a call.”

I stepped up beside Vega and aimed a finger at him. “And if we find our killer and she has little puncture scars across the top of her foot, we’ll be making some calls to the Financial District.”

“I’m telling you, I don’t turn them into anything.”

“We’ll see,” I said.

“I don’t!” he called at our backs as we left his office.

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"A vampire," Vega mused as we drove south.

"Yeah, they're rare outside the Financial District," I said. "The banking class doesn't like having attention drawn to their kind—I wasn't lying to Sonny about that. Rogue vampires who get too homicidal get taken out pretty quick. Sonny knows this, which tells me he probably *has* been playing by their rules all these years. Snacking from his dancers' feet could well be the extent of his vampiric activities." I grimaced at the thought.

"So why did Arnaud send us to him?"

I was still trying to wrap my head around that one. I understood how a creature like Sonny would make the false lead appear more compelling, but a niggling feeling in the back of my brain told me Arnaud was trying to accomplish something more.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I think it's worth getting a list of all the women who have worked for Sonny. Track them down."

"Three decades' worth?" Vega hit me with a hard stare. "Do you know how long that would take?"

"I know, but—"

"We've got two nights, Croft. Not two years."

"Maybe we'll get lucky," I suggested.

Vega's phone rang before she could voice the irritation on her face. "Yeah," she said, then listened. "Be right there." The engine hit another octave as she depressed the accelerator.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Hoffman's got the plans for the Towers at the office. He says he found a way the perp might have gotten in and out. Would you mind coming? If we have something we can act on, we're going to need to start planning. I don't know anything about taking down a blood slave."

What I really wanted to do was get back uptown to Seventieth Street and put eyes on the fae townhouse. But with Vega desperate for results in the face of a looming gang war, I knew leaving her was putting her son at risk. And if she tried to take on the creature alone…

I nodded. "Yeah, I'll go."

"STORM DRAINS," Hoffman said, pointing them out on the blueprint he'd unrolled across Vega's desk. "A system runs directly underneath the towers. And right here's an access point, in the boiler room."

I remembered the rusty grate. "The pipe looked too small for a person."

"For you or me, maybe," Hoffman said, "but it's a foot and a half in diameter. Someone slender could've shimmied up it. And look." He unrolled another blueprint, angling it toward Vega. "After getting the plans from the Housing Authority, I went down to Environmental Protection, got a map of the storm lines in a sixteen-block radius."

I craned my neck to look over the gray paper and network of blue lines.

"Someone wanting to access the drain would've had a few choices," he said, tapping some entry points.

Vega's gaze rose from the map to my face. "What are we going to need?"

"Are you sure this is something you should be rushing into?" I asked.

"Who's this guy think he is?" Hoffman growled.

Vega moved her fists to her hips. I pretended to study the map, racking my brain for anything that would steer the investigation away from Ferguson Towers.

"Croft," she said.

"Have you ever been down a storm drain?" I asked, working out my argument as I spoke. "I did once when I was a kid, on a dare. They're confined, confusing. They take sounds and amplify them, bouncing them every which way. And a lot of stretches involve wading through water, some of it up to here." I placed a hand at thigh level. "My magic doesn't play so well with water. And with a blood slave's speed and strength, we'd be sitting ducks. As your consultant, I'm advising against it."

"You're still talking about blood slaves?" Hoffman asked, incredulous.

"We're going down." Vega's eyes remained hard as tacks. "Now tell us what we need."

She wasn't going to back off, and I couldn't warn her about the threat against her son. Arnaud's rules. I sighed and dragged a hand through my hair. "Silver bullets, for starters."

"And where can we get those?" she asked.

"I know someone, but I don't know what he has in stock. It might take a day or two."

"We both use standard nine-millimeter rounds," Vega said. "We

can change weapons to accommodate the ammo, if needed. Find out what he can supply us *now*—not in one or two days. You can use my phone."

"Um, I'm not sure he has a number."

"What in the hell is this, Croft?" Vega demanded.

"What?"

"Every time something comes up that might advance the investigation, you start squirming."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

Anger sprung from my smoldering bed of guilt. "Look, whether you like it or not, part of my role as your consultant is keeping you safe from the horrors out there. I'm doing the job you're paying me for."

Hoffman snorted. "I'll tell you what's going on," he said to Vega. "Gandalf here knows we're about to find out there ain't no blood slave, or whatever he calls them, so he's milking us for as many hours as he can bill us for. Told you the man was a freaking hustler."

Vega's eyes didn't move from mine. "Do I need to drop you from the case?"

I held her gaze, the corner of my mouth trembling with emotion. In my mind, I was saying, *Fine, screw it. Go off and do whatever you want. Get yourselves killed. I don't need this.* But that was the stress talking. I took a deep breath and dropped my gaze back to the map.

"Fine," I said, holding up a hand. "I'll see what I can find out about those bullets."

AN HOUR LATER, I exited Mr. Han's apothecary with two boxes of nine-millimeter silver bullets in my coat pockets, along with a third box packed with silver bullets and cold iron ones for my own use. I could have lied to Vega, of course, told her my source had been out, but she was getting better at seeing through my lies. The best I could do right now was stall her.

All right, I thought as I paced north. *Vega gave me three hours to track down the bullets, which means I have enough time to go home and try to prepare a spell or two to get into that fae townhouse and look for Caroline.*

"Well, lookie here," someone said.

It didn't occur to me I had crossed Canal Street and entered Little Italy until I recognized the voice at my back.

"We don't have to go to his place after all."

I wheeled to find Floyd striding up behind me, a pistol aiming

from the waist of his cinched coat. To the left, Whitey was steering a Studebaker along the one-way street beside us, his pale eyes tracking me.

"C'mon, man," I said. "I told you I have an alibi."

"Yeah, and guess what," Floyd said. "It didn't check out."

"What? Who did you talk to?"

"Detective named Hoffman. Real helpful."

"Hoffman? He was the one who picked me up from the gala," I said, then stopped as cold understanding took hold. That was one way to get rid of someone you believed to be a con man.

"Not according to him, you weren't," Floyd said.

"Did you talk to Detective Vega? She'll vouch for me."

Floyd let out a barking laugh. "I bet she will. How much did that cost you?"

"Cost?" Great, so not only had Hoffman denied seeing me the night of Caroline's disappearance, but to discredit whatever Vega might say, he claimed I'd paid her off. That tire-shaped son of a bitch. "There were other officers at the scene," I said, backing away.

"Yeah, and you probably gave them a little something too. Now why don't you climb on into the car." He signaled with the gun.

God, I don't have time for this.

I nodded but angled my cane so it was pointing at his stomach. *"Vigore!"* I yelled, anticipating the force that would burst from my cane and hit Floyd hard enough to lift him from his feet. But the meager force barely rattled my cane. Some trash near Floyd's feet puffed up.

I refocused. *"Vigore!"*

"Yeah, that's real cute," Floyd said. "Now c'mon, you're testing our patience here."

He grabbed me by the shoulder of my coat and jabbed the pistol barrel against my low back. A sharp pain opened in my left kidney, but I was still fixated on my cane.

"Respingere!" I cried, trying for a shield to shove Floyd off me.

"Let's go, let's go."

As Floyd walked me off the curb, I remembered the warping sensation of the fae threshold when I'd tried to force my way in. That bit of contact must have scrambled my abilities, knocked them offline. I hadn't noticed any changes at the time, but fae magic was often subtle.

Fantastic timing.

By the time we arrived at the car, Whitey had gotten out and opened a backdoor. Without my power, I had no choice but to duck inside. Floyd scooted in after me. He didn't need to warn me not to try anything funny. He was saying it all with the pressure of his barrel.

The plastic-covered seat spoke volumes as well.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," Floyd said.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To talk to someone."

"Not the fish, I hope."

Floyd chuckled. "Well, that's gonna be up to you." He pulled a phone from his coat and made a call. "We picked him up in Little Italy," he said. "Yeah. Yeah. All right. We'll meet you down there."

He put his phone away and tapped Whitey's shoulder. "Pier sixteen."

Recent experience told me I was being taken to the mob boss—who had taken a keen interest in Caroline's whereabouts, for some reason. I examined my hands, my right pinky still a little off where Bashi had had it snapped a few months earlier. I just hoped Mr. Moretti would prove less volatile, though mob bosses and piers rarely worked out for people like me.

Whitey drove us onto an abandoned shipping dock, where huge metal containers stood in rusting stacks. At a chain-link fence, he got out, unfastened a lock, and rolled the gate open. Seagulls scattered from what looked like a rotting dog carcass as we drove through. Whitey parked close to the water's edge, almost in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge.

I tested my cane with a whispered Word, but still nothing. When I tried to inch away from Floyd's pistol, he dug it even deeper into my ribs. "I'm telling you," I sighed. "Caroline didn't leave the party with me. She left with a guy named Angelus."

Floyd laughed. "Couldn't even come up with a regular-sounding name."

"Which should tell you I'm not lying."

"Shut it," Floyd said. "He's here."

I craned my neck around to see a black Escalade with tinted windows easing through the gate and onto the cement pier. It pulled up next to my side of the car and sat, engine idling.

"Let's go," Floyd said, shoving the pistol against me. "Slowly, though."

My door lock popped open and I stepped out, Floyd scooting across the seat after me. I considered making a run for it, but Whitey had chosen the spot for a reason. It was open, exposed, the closest shipping container a good fifty yards away. If I could summon a shield, piece of cake. But since my powers had taken a fae-induced crap, I had no choice but to follow orders.

Floyd seized me by the upper arm and opened the back door of the Escalade. "Get in," he said.

The back seat was empty, but I could make out the silhouettes of

the driver and a large man in the passenger seat. Mr. Moretti, I presumed. Floyd prodded me, and I scooted across the seat—one not covered in plastic, I noted with some relief. After climbing in after me, Floyd closed the door. I shifted in a sudden darkness that smelled of oily hair tonic.

"Where is she?" the man in the passenger seat asked.

"I'm assuming you mean Caroline?"

He remained staring straight ahead, his silence thickening the air.

"Well, as I told Floyd here, I consult for the NYPD. I was called to a case last night and left Caroline in the company of a guy named Angelus. By the time I returned, she had already left."

"With someone who looked just like you," the man said.

"Apparently."

"You see, the problem I'm having here is twofold." The man's voice was low and husky, as though each word were passing over a grater. *Was* he Mr. Moretti? "One, we have several witnesses who saw you and her leave together. And two, no one in the NYPD can corroborate your story."

"Well, I can explain the second," I said, my voice thin and unconvincing. "Detective Hoffman doesn't like that I'm consulting for the Department. He did in fact pick me up from the gala last night, at about—"

"Enough bullshitting," the man cut in. "Where is she?" I could make out his hair now: iron-colored, combed back in severe lines. He shifted a pair of broad shoulders that were almost level with his ears.

"Believe it or not, I'm trying to find that out, too. I did manage to get an address for this Angelus. It's on the Upper East Side, Seventieth Street. A butler stonewalled me, but I'm—"

"Where is she?" he repeated.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," I cried in exasperation. "I don't know where she is, but I've tracked down the address of the last person I saw her with. Someone who…" I stopped, uncertain how to complete the sentence. *…can change his appearance? …has wild-crazy powers?*

"I'm going to ask you one more time," the man said. He turned until an aging face waxed into view. "Where's Caroline?" Familiar blue eyes stared hard into mine. "Where's my daughter?"

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"Mr. *Reid?*" I said.

I'd met him once, a year before, his hand crushing mine when we shook. I had known that if my trial relationship with his daughter progressed, there was a good chance I'd be seeing him more often—something I was inwardly dreading—but, Jesus, not like this, not on a pier in the back of an SUV with a wise guy jamming a pistol against my ribs.

"I spoke with your department chair," Mr. Reid said.

"Who? Snodgrass?"

"He said he's caught you watching Caroline through her classroom window while she teaches."

Heat broke out over my face. "Once or twice, maybe."

"And that you frequently ask her out to lunch."

"Well, yeah. But to which she frequently says yes."

"He described it as an unhealthy infatuation."

"I don't know about the unhealthy part."

"He also says you're unstable. That you were the main suspect in a homicide investigation a couple of years ago, a crime you were arrested for but made some sort of a plea deal to get out of."

"Well, Snodgrass doesn't like me much, either."

"Sounds like your unpopularity crops up whenever it's most convenient." Though Floyd snorted beside me, Mr. Reid didn't crack a smile. "Be that as it may," he continued, "Snodgrass was telling the truth. The records were buried, but everything he told me was in them."

"If you're implying I hurt your daughter, Mr. Reid…" I licked my lips. "God, nothing could be further from the truth. I've been trying to reach her on her phone since late last night—you can check the phone records. And right after Floyd and Whitey visited me this morning and I understood she was missing, I started looking for the man I'd last seen her with. I got a street, I found the townhouse, I interrogated the butler. I mean, we're wasting our time sitting here."

"The townhouse on East Seventieth Street?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"So what were you doing in lower Manhattan?"

"I was, um, helping the NYPD with something."

He sighed and turned away. "The NYPD again."

"I know how that sounds. I know how this all sounds." I had never felt more impotent in my life. Not only were my powers offline, but every word I spoke sounded like utter horse manure. And this in front of a man whose daughter I was in love with.

Though I did have to wonder how Mr. Reid had gotten mixed up with Moretti's men, especially since Caroline insisted he would never deal with gangsters. Either there was a side to her father she didn't know about, or, desperate for his daughter's safe return, he had decided to compromise his ethics. Filing a missing person report with the NYPD was no guarantee of action after all. If you wanted results, you had to pay for them. Hiring Moretti's men, who could probably use all the work they could get these days, fell into that category.

"There's only one way you're getting out of this," Mr. Reid said. "And that's by giving me something I can use."

I racked my brain. "I, ah…" I remembered something and leaned forward. "When Angelus first asked to speak with your daughter at the gala, she blew him off. But when he said it had something to do with her father, with *you*, she agreed."

Mr. Reid stared through the windshield in the direction of a garbage boat chugging up the East River.

"Do you know why that might have been?" I pressed.

He turned just enough to make eye contact with Floyd.

The pistol jabbed into my side. "Let's go," Floyd said.

"Wait. Mr. Reid," I pled, "I'm telling you the truth."

"The first time I met you, you struck me as a bullshit artist," Mr. Reid said. "I even told Caroline that. Wish she would've listened."

My door opened, and Whitey was there to yank me out by the arm. I stumbled into the harsh gray light, Floyd emerging against my other side. As the two wrestled me back toward their car, I heard the Escalade wheeling around behind me and leaving the pier.

"Where are you taking me now?" I asked. "The zoo?"

"No," Floyd replied. "But by the time we're through with you, you're gonna be singing like one of them macaws."

I planted my feet and resisted. I didn't have a plan, but I wasn't getting back into their car.

"You want us to work you over out here?" Floyd asked. "That it?"

"What can I say?" I grunted, resisting their efforts to drag me forward. "I'm an exhibitionist."

"Hear that, Whitey? Man wants to be beaten bloody for the world to see." He jerked the cane from my hand and sent it clattering across the pier. When he turned back to face me, I drove a fist into his nose.

"That's for this morning," I said.

Floyd staggered back, a hand to his spurting nose. “Y-you broke it!”

“Believe me, it’s an enhancement.”

“Oh, you screwed up.” I turned toward Whitey’s raspy voice and met a pair of pale eyes as devoid of empathy as the black bore staring at my forehead. “You screwed up big time.”

“Waste him,” I heard Floyd call from behind me, his voice clogged with blood. “Screw the job, just waste him.”

I’d been gambling that Mr. Reid wouldn’t want a professional hit on his hands. Plus, what good was I to him dead? What I had underestimated was Moretti’s men taking matters into their own hands.

Whitey smiled thinly as he cocked the revolver.

I threw my forearms over my face and crouched away. But the shot never came. When I peeked out, Whitey was on his back, arms and legs spread like a man after a night of extreme bar-hopping. Floyd lay nearby on his side, blood pooling beside his head.

I turned around to find Blondie straightening the sleeves of his jacket. Two more blood slaves stood at his back.

“I hate to look a gift horse in the mouth,” I said, peering back at Moretti’s men, “but twice in one day?”

“Arnaud has another lead for you to give to the detective,” Blondie said.

I accepted the piece of paper he held out and looked it over. Arnaud’s spidery handwriting read:

Claudette Poole, Headmistress
Hangar Hall School for Girls
Hauppauge, New York

From a strip joint to a girl’s boarding school?

“We still have eyes on the boy,” Blondie reminded me.

I read the contact info a second time, wondering how in the hell I was going to convince Vega to pursue another Arnaud lead, especially one so far away.

“Fine,” I sighed, pocketing the paper. “But do you mind telling me what the trip to Sonny’s was all about?”

Intelligence seemed to infuse Blondie’s empty gaze. “Well, it is like the old line goes,” he replied in a familiar, taunting voice. “Do as you’re told and no one gets hurt.”

“Is he involved with the killer?”

“Sonny has been involved with many people,” Arnaud-as-Blondie said. “And for some, that’s a problem.”

“Who?” I pressed.

“Who, indeed?” Arnaud smiled impishly as though to say the Q&A was over.

“Can you at least explain the new lead? Give me something I can use to convince Detective Vega?”

“For someone as resourceful as yourself, Mr. Croft, I trust you’ll come up with a compelling reason all on your own.”

He gave a small wave and disappeared from Blondie’s eyes. I looked back at Floyd and Whitey, who had begun to stir. Time to make tracks. I would need to stop off at my apartment to grab a few things and explain the situation to Tabitha, but with Mr. Reid and Moretti’s men after me, I wouldn’t be able to stay there. I had to come up with another staging area, somewhere they wouldn’t think to look for me.

After a moment’s deliberation, I had one.

I grabbed my cane and left the pier at a run.

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I poked my revolver into the East Village apartment. “Hello?”

No answer, no sounds of movement. I stepped inside and made a quick tour of the rooms. The unit appeared to have seen at least one more squatter since Clifford Rhodes, the stringy-haired vagrant who had summoned a shrieker six months earlier, but it was presently vacant. I set down two duffle bags loaded with items I’d gathered at my apartment and bought en route. Fortunately, Moretti’s men hadn’t recovered in time to head me off.

From one of the bags I pulled out a padlock, screwdriver, and two door-hasp kits. I spent several minutes screwing the thick metal hasps to both sides of the door and adjacent frame, then clicked the padlock home through the inside hasp. The security system was nowhere close to what I had at my own apartment, but I hoped it would keep just anyone—and hopefully any*thing*—from wandering in.

And it looked like this dump was going to be home for a while.

I sighed as I made another tour of the apartment. No electricity, a trickle of cold running water, and from the bathroom, a sewer-like smell that could fell an ogre. On the plus side, the steel bed frame and roll-up mattress remained, as well as the table, Bunsen burner, and propane tank from Clifford’s time here. With dusk dimming the unit, I set several candles around the old lab and lit them. I then pulled an iron pot and several spell items from my bags.

One of the spells I had been planning was a nullifying spell—to try to neutralize the fae magic protecting the townhouse. But with my powers scrambled, that spell was out. Instead, I would have to cook a potion to neutralize the effect the fae magic was having on me.

I opened the valve on the propane tank and fired up the Bunsen burner. I set the iron pot on a mesh platform above the burner and poured in some green absinthe. To the absinthe, I added salt, iron dust, and shavings of rowan wood, stirring the ingredients with my engraved spoon. With none of my own power to channel, I directed my intentions through what energy remained in my coin pendant, which I held over the potion.

I was just tapping the spoon against the rim of the pot and setting it on the table when the pager went off.

That'll be Vega, wanting her bullets.

I twisted the Bunsen burner to a low blue flame, checked the pager, and then left the unit, moving the padlock to the outside hasp and snapping it closed behind me.

Dusk had settled over the city by the time I stepped out onto the street. It took several blocks of wandering through the bombed-out neighborhood—the last place Moretti's men would think to look for me—before I found a working payphone.

"Did you get them?" Vega asked without preamble.

"Two boxes' worth," I replied. "What's up?"

"We're going down tonight."

"Into the storm lines?"

"No, Funky Town," she said in exasperation. "Yes, the storm lines."

"Well, look. Arnaud gave us another lead."

"Who?"

"I don't know, some administrator at a boarding school."

"Did he say why?"

"No, just that it's someone we would be interested in talking to."

"Where is this school?"

"Out on Long Island." I cringed before adding, "Hauppauge."

"Forget it," she said.

The finality in her voice was what I'd feared. "Why?"

"He's playing us."

"I don't know… That visit to Sonny's could well lead to something. I mean, the man did turn out to be a vampire."

"The only thing it's leading us down is a false trail."

"I just think—"

"Forget it," Vega repeated. "Where can I pick up the bullets?"

I thought desperately. Arnaud wasn't dumb. The second his blood slaves observed us descending into a drain, even a drain blocks from Ferguson Towers, he would guess what we were up to. Which would mean I hadn't kept up my end of the deal. Vega's child would be snatched—or worse.

"I'll bring them to you," I said finally.

"When?"

"Give me an hour?"

"Fine, but no more."

I hung up. I had bought some time, anyway. I turned from the phone and made my way around months-old trash piles back toward the apartment. A few blocks to the north, I could make out the silhouettes of ghouls in a roving pack. Before they could pick up my scent, I broke into a run.

I was going to love my new neighborhood.

"ABOUT TIME," Vega said with a huff.

"Yeah, sorry." I set the boxes of ammo on her desk. "Had a hard time catching a cab."

She wasted no time opening the top box, inspecting the ammo, and loading the silver bullets into her service pistol. I patted my waistband and pockets. Damn. Still not used to carrying a gun, I'd left my own at the East Village apartment. I eyed Vega's black body armor. A helmet with a headlamp sat on one end of her desk.

"So you're really serious about this," I said.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I just think we should give it another day. Check out the other lead first."

"You're doing it again," she said without looking up.

"Doing what?"

"Squirming." She checked her loaded weapon and holstered it.

"I've already told you, I can't help you down there."

"Who said anything about you going down?"

I stared at her. "Come again?"

"Do you think I'd put a civilian consultant in that kind of danger?" She gave a sharp laugh. "My new role is under enough scrutiny as it is."

"You're planning on going down alone?"

"Not alone."

At that moment, Hoffman came waddling into the office in his own set of body armor. His eyes widened briefly when they met mine.

"Surprised to see me?" I asked.

"Disgusted is more like it." He fidgeted with his Kevlar vest.

"Thanks for the alibi, by the way."

"What are you talking about?" Vega asked.

"Do you want to tell her?" I asked Hoffman.

"You're making a big deal out of nothing," he said. "Couple of Moretti's men wanted to know what time I picked up Dumbledore here last night. Told 'em I couldn't remember."

"You told them a hell of a lot more than that," I said. "Including that Vega couldn't be trusted."

"Moretti's men?" Vega's eyebrows crushed down. This was going to be good. "You're talking to Moretti's men?"

"Naw," Hoffman said. "I mean, it's not a regular thing or nothing. Like I said, they—"

"Listen here." Vega drew herself up in front of him. "If I hear you're talking with Moretti's men—or *any* of the bosses' meat heads—I will personally walk you to internal affairs and see that your ass never

wears the NYPD shield again. They might have worked their slimy tentacles into other units, but I'll be goddamned if they're going to infiltrate mine. Are we clear?"

"Sure," Hoffman said, scratching his nose. "Geez."

When he glanced over at me, I showed him my smuggest smile. There was a lot more I could have told Vega, but watching him being upbraided was worth it for now.

"So are we going or what?" Hoffman grumbled.

Vega glowered at him another moment before turning to collect her helmet.

"Guys," I said. "There's, ah, one other thing I need to do before you set out."

"What?" Vega demanded.

"It's a ritual of protection. Sort of a magical layer of armor against whatever you might encounter down there."

"I don't frigging believe this," Hoffman groaned.

I was already sprinkling a circle of copper filings over the floor.

"Is a ritual really necessary?" Vega asked, eyeing the symbol skeptically.

I nodded. *Yeah, but not for the reason I'm telling you.* I stepped into the circle and, ensuring I had a view of the security monitors in the main room, gestured for Vega and Hoffman to join me.

"If this is some kind of trap…" Vega said.

"I swear on everything I hold dear, it's not. Besides, I would be stuck inside it too."

Vega looked at me another moment, eyes narrowing, before stepping into the circle. She turned to her partner. "Hoffman," she ordered.

Still smarting from his dressing down, he muttered and joined us.

"In close," I said. "Arms around each others' waists."

Hoffman leaned away. "You serious?"

"Do it," Vega said, slipping her arm behind me.

"Can't you see he's playing us?" Hoffman said.

On the matter of holding waists, I was, actually. That part was completely unnecessary for the spell to work. I pulled Hoffman up against me and gave the fat roll on his far side a little pinch.

"All right," I said. "You might get swimmy-headed, but that'll pass."

I spoke a Word to close the circle, then centered myself. The potion I'd drunk an hour before to break up the fae magic was still working on me, still smoothing out the final wrinkles in my magical lines.

"Imitare," I said.

"What?" Hoffman barked.

Vega shushed him.

“Imitare,” I repeated. Energy flowed through me like electricity, spilling into the circle at our feet, gaining strength. *“Imitare.”*

I repeated the incantation, eyeing the security feed from the vehicle checkpoint at the front of the building. For several minutes, I watched the cars pulling up to the mechanical gate.

“What is this?” Hoffman grumbled, looking at the growing light around his feet.

A moment later, I had my car: a black sedan with tinted windows. With each spoken Word, I had been fashioning a three-dimensional likeness of us in my mental prism. Now, with an uttered *“Liberare,”* I released the projection onto street level. And there we were on the monitor, as if we’d just walked out of the building. I squinted at our likenesses, impressed by the detail. It was as though the remaining fae magic that trickled through me was acting as a booster now instead of a foil. I manipulated the projections, walking us toward the idling sedan.

“Aprire,” I said.

The sedan’s rear door opened. I manipulated our projections to make it look as though we were ducking into the back seat. A moment later, an actual passenger got out of the front seat, looked around in confusion, then slammed the rear door before climbing back in.

The access gate opened, and the sedan slid into the flow of city traffic.

Three shadows darted up the sidewalk, paralleling the car. It had worked. The blood slaves had taken the bait. Exhaling, I broke the circle. The remaining energy puffed out into the room.

“It’s done,” I said.

“About time,” Hoffman muttered, jerking his arm from around my waist.

While he and Vega donned their helmets, I glanced over the schematic of the storm lines, noting the marks in red—their planned route to Ferguson Towers. The entry point was a drainage culvert on the East River, near Montgomery Street. I knew how to get there.

“Good luck,” I told them. “If you run into the creature, be sure to aim for the heart.”

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A cold wind blew off the East River, batting my cinched coat and chaffing my cheeks. I could see the EPA man who had probably opened and closed the chain-link gate for Vega and Hoffman sitting in a parked van beyond, the orange ember of a cigarette drawing his face from the darkness.

I raised my gaze to where thick razor wire coiled along the top of the fence. Going over was out. I followed the fence until I could no longer see the van, and inserted the end of my cane into one of the lower links.

"Protezione," I whispered.

The small orb of a light shield took shape, stretching the steel wire. I willed the orb out until the link gave. The fence began to rattle as I pushed more energy into the spell, links contorting and popping around an ever-expanding hole. At last, it was large enough for me to withdraw the cane and duck through.

Deepening the shadows around me with another Word, I slipped past the EPA van and down a short drive until I was standing beside Vega's parked car, which faced the large drainage culvert.

The fence that guarded the cement cylinder stood wide, an open padlock hanging from one of the links. The security was as much to keep people out as to keep the ghouls in. Another reason I wasn't going to let Vega tackle this alone. I just had to pray the projection spell had thrown Arnaud and the blood slaves off long enough to keep Vega's son safe.

Straddling a trickle of slimy water, I entered the culvert's open mouth. The space smelled like a public restroom. I called light to my cane and held it out. A round graffiti-tagged corridor swelled into view. I started forward at a fast walk, trying to ignore the fact I was going underground.

At a four-way intersection beneath what I guessed to be Madison Street, I began to turn left, but quickly killed my light and drew back. Vega and Hoffman were down there, about fifty yards away, headlamps shining into another corridor along the north side of the tunnel. They spoke in rapid whispers, but the acoustics were making an echoing confusion of their words.

I tiptoed toward them, using my cane to deepen the darkness around me.

"…sleeping bag over here," I heard Vega say. She disappeared into what I realized wasn't another tunnel, but a service room in the wall, a couple of feet off the floor. "And that looks like dried blood."

"You think it's the killer's?" Hoffman asked.

"If the blood matches the saliva, we'll have our answer."

I was fairly certain what that answer would be. We were only a couple of blocks from Ferguson Towers, which made this a prime spot for a rogue blood slave to lair and rise whenever its hunger struck.

I pressed my body to the wall as Hoffman shone his light up and down the tunnel. He didn't spot me, but he had missed something far more important up the tunnel—eye shine.

I yanked my cane into sword and staff.

"Illuminare!" White light shot from my orb and down the tunnel, past where Hoffman stood, hitting the creature bearing down on him. Only it was no blood slave.

Long hair draped glowing red eyes and a jutting jaw of bunched teeth. And the creature was too tall for a blood slave. It had to stoop as it ran toward Hoffman, long arms knuckling the floor.

Hoffman raised a hand to block my light, oblivious to the danger. "Croft? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Get down!" I shouted, following it with, *"Vigore!"*

A blast chased the light and roared down the tunnel. Thanks to remnants of the fae magic, the force quickly grew beyond my control. The force pummeled Hoffman, sending him tumbling toward the creature, who had steeled itself in a crouch, head bowed.

Oh, shit.

"Croft!" Hoffman shouted in rage.

I ran forward, pushing more light through my staff, hoping to blind the creature from seeing the meal I had just shoved in front of it. Hoffman rolled to a flopping rest on his back, his silver-bullet-loaded pistol glistening in the shallow creek a good twenty feet behind him. He lifted his head, his breath choking off as the creature's nightmare face rose into his view.

"Vega!" Hoffman wheezed.

Striated cords popped from the creature's shoulders as it reared to pounce.

"Protezione!" I shouted.

The creature slammed into the shield of light I threw in front of Hoffman. But before I could shape it into a protective dome, the creature darted a clawed hand around the barrier and seized Hoffman's leg.

"Leggo!" Hoffman cried, kicking at it with his free foot.

I sprinted forward, the movement jostling my ability to hold the shield together, but I needed to get close enough to attack the creature without inflicting collateral damage on Hoffman. Explosions went off behind me and rang down the tunnel. Blood burst from the creature's shoulder.

Vega!

The creature threw its head back in a furious cry and released Hoffman. I wasted no time grabbing his pant cuff with a Word and dragging him from the creature. Water slewed up around him as I pulled him behind us.

"Its heart!" I called to Vega. "Aim for the heart!"

By the time I looked back, the creature had lowered itself to all fours and was bounding toward us in a rapid zigzag. Smoke rose from the spot where it had been struck. Vega's pistol banged out another series of shots, bullets caroming off walls. But the creature wasn't slowing.

I stepped forward and raised my glowing staff. *"Protezione!"* I shouted.

A plate of light spread over the tunnel. I staggered as the creature rammed into it head first, breaking through in a bright shower of sparks. But I had slowed it down, enabling me to close it in a second light shield. Snapping its protuberant jaw, the creature rammed against the barrier again and again.

"What in the hell is that thing?" Vega asked, coming up beside me.

"Don't know," I said, between strained grunts. "But its a she." The light from my invocation showed that much. "Some sort of vampire, but she's damned powerful. I can't crush her, and I'm not sure how long I can hold her like this. Going to give you a shot at her heart."

"Okay, but I need to reload."

Dipping into my power reserves, I flattened the shield until the creature's arms and legs were pinned. I then lifted her into a standing position. She snarled and snapped, muscles leaping from her bone-white skin. I'd been telling Vega the truth. I had no idea what the creature was, how she had come to be. I opened a hole in the shield over the creature's sternum.

"Don't know how you're doing this, Merlin," Hoffman said, circling the creature in a limp to retrieve his pistol. "But I'll be happy to do the honors."

"Fine," I grunted, "but hurry."

The creamy white light that heralded a Thelonious visit had begun to wisp around my vision. I was only vaguely aware that Grandpa's ring was squeezing my finger in pulsating beats.

Something solid struck my head. I splashed into the slimy drainage but managed to keep my staff aloft. Dark-suited figures flashed past.

Gunshots banged around me. In the confusion, I strained to hold the invocation, to keep the creature entrapped. Until a leather shoe flashed in and kicked my staff away.

The light shield around the creature wobbled and then broke apart.

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Hands seized the lapels of my coat and slammed me against a wall.

"Did you really think you could deceive me?" Though Blondie's mouth moved, I heard Arnaud's hissing voice.

Sounds of struggle echoed up and down the tunnel. I turned my head to find another blood slave pinning Vega's arms behind her. Her headlamp jostled as she swore and kicked at his shins. Down the tunnel to my left, Hoffman was on his back, a third blood slave stepping on his throat.

Blondie shook me. "I gave you two simple directives. One, stay away from the Towers. Two, follow my leads."

"Wh-what happened to the creature?" I gasped, peering around. She should have ripped us all apart. She still could.

"Your only concern right now should be for the consequences of your insolence. But first things first."

Blondie seized Grandpa's pulsating ring and twisted. I shouted out in pain as bone crunched, and the ring, abrading the length of my finger in an attempt to hold on, finally popped free. He tossed the enchanted ring to a blood slave, who splashed off, no doubt rushing it to Arnaud.

I gritted my teeth. "Goddamn you."

"That's for violating our earlier agreement that you remain outside of the Financial District. As for our present agreement, you now have a choice to make." He clamped the top of my head with his fingers and twisted until I was looking at Hoffman, still down. "The detective?" He swiveled my head the other way, where Vega continued to kick and swear. "Or the detective?"

"What are you asking?"

"One lives, one dies," Blondie said. "The decision is yours."

"And if I don't play your stupid game?" My throbbing finger was making me nauseas.

"Then you are condemning them both."

The easy choice was Hoffman, but I wasn't going to be an accomplice to murder.

"Fine, kill me. Spare them."

“Oh, no.” Blondie laughed. “That would be letting you off too easy.” His lips straightened. “Now choose.”

With Vega struggling and Hoffman down for the count, neither could hear our exchange, neither knew that their lives rested in the hands of a wizard in entirely over his head.

“First tell me what the creature is to you,” I said.

“You’re stalling for time, Mr. Croft.”

“Why are you protecting her?”

“That’s the shame of it,” he said. “Had you listened to me, who knows what you might have discovered?”

“Why can’t you just tell me?”

“We’ve wasted enough time,” Blondie said. “My men are getting restless. If you do not choose within the next ten seconds, your friends will both suffer broken necks.”

“You sure you want the attention a couple of dead detectives are going to bring?” I asked.

“Oh, the attention won’t be on me, Mr. Croft. By the time the bodies are found, my associates will be long gone, and it will be *your* evidence investigators will discover around the victims.”

“Bullshit.”

“Five seconds, Mr. Croft.”

I took a quick peek at Vega, then Hoffman. I stopped and looked at Vega a second time. Behind her, several figures were easing up the tunnel. More blood slaves?

“Three,” Blondie said. “Two…”

One of the figures aimed what looked like a shotgun.

“All right, all right,” I said. “You want my choice?”

“One.”

I thrust my arms out, driving both palms into Blondie’s chest. Caught by surprise, he teetered back on his heels, arms flailing for balance. I crouched and turned as the shotgun went off, shots nailing my whipping trench coat, one grazing my hip in a bright flare. The blast blew Blondie halfway around, tearing skin from his face, as though by a sandblaster.

I dove for my sword, grasped the handle, and rose to face Vega’s blood slave. But he had released Vega and was sagging, a long, slender blade skewering his chest from behind. The sword’s owner gave the blade a hard twist and then drew it free. When the slave splashed to the tunnel floor, I did a double take at the female figure now beside Vega. Remembering Hoffman, I wheeled toward him. His blood slave was down too, gargling and pawing at a dagger in his throat.

A slender figure arrived above him, leather glistening in the detectives’ headlamps, and drove another dagger into the slave’s heart. He twisted the blade each way and pulled it out.

“Goodnight, sweet prince,” he said, drawing a forearm across his brow.

The shotgun went off a second time, and Blondie landed on his back beside me, his chest blown open.

I looked from the downed blood slaves to the new arrivals. As Vega went to help Hoffman up, I retrieved my staff, calling light to it. The three figures that glowed into view were instantly familiar: a towering tattoo-faced man holding a pump-action shotgun, a rail-thin woman with spiked pink hair, and a lithe man in leathers, his hair dyed neon green.

“…the hell?” I whispered.

Tattoo Face squinted at me before his face lit up like a bulb. “I don’t believe it! Mr. Wednesday Night!” He hustled over and wrapped a huge arm around me, pulling me into a crushing side hug.

“You know each other?” Vega asked.

“He came to one of our house parties back in October,” Tattoo Face said. “The guy’s a freaking animal.”

Blade’s pink lips smirked. “You should see him when he disrobes.”

My cheeks blazed as Vega looked from the punks to me in puzzlement. I hurried to explain. “They lived below someone involved in that case we worked together in the fall. I sort of … bumped into them.” I left out the part about Thelonious paying our world a visit, downing a bottle of cheap liquor, crashing their party, and then depositing me on a mattress, half-naked, with Blade.

Vega nodded slowly as though I’d explained absolutely nothing.

I looked from the shotgun Tattoo Face held, to the leather-wrapped sword handle showing above Blade’s left shoulder, to the pair of ninja swords Green Hair had sheathed across his back in an X. I was still trying to figure out how and why they had ended up in the storm line.

Vega showed her badge and introduced herself and Hoffman. “And your names are…?”

Acting as spokeswoman, Blade stepped forward. “This is Bullet,” she said, slapping the back of a hand against Tattoo Face’s chest. “I’m Blade. And our sometimes guitarist over there is Dr. Z.”

Green Hair bowed slightly.

Hoffman limped forward. “How ’bout giving us some real names,” he said, his throat still hoarse from being stepped on.

“How about we don’t,” Blade said. “And I never heard a ‘thanks’ from you.”

“You have permits for those weapons?” he demanded.

Vega shook her head for him to back down. “We appreciate you helping us out,” she said to Blade. “But we do have to know what you’re doing here. You’ve walked into the middle of a murder investigation.”

I caught Bullet and Dr. Z glancing over at one another.

Vega must have caught it too. “Something you guys want to tell me?”

“Have you found anything?” Blade asked.

“That’s not something we can discuss with the public,” Vega said.

“Why?” I asked Blade. “Are you looking for someone?”

It had taken me a few moments, but I had connected their presence to the weapons they carried to the skill they had just shown in destroying the blood slaves. They might have been punk rockers for kicks, but they were vampire hunters by trade. They were trying to track down the killer.

Blade’s dark eyes met mine. “That’s not a matter we can discuss with the public.”

Vega opened her mouth to say something when her phone rang. She drew it from a back pocket. “Vega,” she barked, pulling off her helmet. *“What?”* Her face went pale in the light of my staff. “All right, stay in the apartment. I’ll be right there.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Vega jammed her phone away and began running back toward the main line.

“Hey, what happened?” I asked, splashing to keep up. I heard Hoffman laboring into a limping run behind us.

“Some men grabbed Tony,” Vega said.

“Tony?” I struggled to place the name.

“My son.”

A boulder dropped into my stomach.

Oh, shit.

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When we arrived at Vega's apartment, the door was hanging from one hinge, and a middle-aged woman, who I guessed to be Tony's babysitter, was pacing and sobbing hysterically.

"Tell me exactly what happened," Vega said, her voice as tight as a suspension cable on the George Washington Bridge.

When the woman wheeled toward us, her face was a disaster of mascara and bloated eyelids. "Oh, Ricki," she said. "Oh, Jesus. They come and—and they take him."

"Who came, Camilla?" Vega demanded.

"I didn't see," she said. "I go to bathroom. Tony asleep over there." I followed her trembling finger to where a multi-colored heap of Legos were scattered across a couch. "And when I come out, the door broken, and—and—and—"

Her voice seemed to stick as she wrung a ball of stained tissues in her hands.

"And what, Camilla?" Vega seized her shoulders.

Camilla managed to swallow, which opened the pipes to more sobbing. "And they gone, Ricki. I run out, but men already at staircase. Door close behind them. By time I get there, I can no see them."

"What did the men look like?" Vega asked.

"Too far away. Too dark. Light by staircase still broken."

"Did you go to a window? Did you see what kind of vehicle they left in?"

Camilla shook her head in anguish. "Oh, God. I so sorry, Ricki. Oh, Jesus."

I watched the whole exchange numbly, knowing full well who had taken her son and why. I hadn't been able to steer Vega from the Towers. I hadn't kept her chasing Arnaud's so-called leads. Worse, three of his blood slaves had been killed. I examined my skinned and swollen middle finger, which I'd managed to put some healing magic to on the ride here. Knowing Arnaud, he would feel perfectly justified having Tony slaughtered as retribution for his losses. The vampire had committed acts more heinous in his time.

"All right," Vega said, sitting Camilla on the couch. "I'm going to

call it in as a kidnapping. Hoffman, I want you to canvass the neighborhood, see if anyone might have seen Tony being carried down the street or put in a vehicle. I'll start a search by car."

With practiced eyes, Vega scanned her walls of framed photos, no doubt looking for the most recent image of her son. "Take this," she said, removing a close-up of Tony's smiling face and handing it to Hoffman. He stared down at it gravely, nodded, and left the apartment.

Vega was pulling her phone out when I heard myself speak.

"Detective, wait." I cleared my throat. "I know who took him."

Vega stopped scrolling and looked up at me. "What?"

"I know who took your son."

Without moving her gaze from mine, she said, "Camilla, why don't you go lie down? Use my bedroom. Close the door behind you."

"Yes, Ricki," she said, sniffling and sponging her nose.

When the bedroom door closed, Vega stepped toward me, eyebrows knifing down. "Start talking, Croft."

"Earlier today, when I met with Arnaud, he gave me the job of keeping you away from Ferguson Towers. He didn't say why. If I failed or told you what was up, he threatened to take your son."

"Is that what those leads were about?" Vega's voice sounded distant, dangerous.

"Yeah."

"And it never crossed your mind to clue me in."

"Of course it did, but he said if you changed your son's routines or put any kind of extra protection around him, he would know."

"So you've been working against me this whole time."

"I wouldn't put it in quite those terms. And it wasn't like I had a choice."

"What else did he offer you?"

I swallowed. "What?"

"If you had told me yesterday, I could've figured something out. I could have worked the Towers case from a distance and kept my son safe." Her voice faltered for the first time.

Even though I felt like the world's biggest asshat, my throat tightened defensively. "Look, when I met with Arnaud, he exuded this mind-fogging toxin. He practically fumigated his office with it. I couldn't think straight. I agreed to his terms because I couldn't see another way out."

"And he didn't promise anything else?"

Such as what became of your dear mother.

"No."

She searched my eyes, then turned toward the bedroom. "Camilla," she called, "stay here. I'm going out."

“Yes, Ricki,” came Camilla’s muffled voice.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

At the door, she checked her service pistol. “To make Arnaud tell me where my son is.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I hustled after her into the hallway. “Do you think he’s just going to let you into the Financial District? Let you up to his office? There’s a reason he’s built a fortress around himself.”

“I could give two fucks.”

I caught up to her at the door to the stairwell and seized her arm. She stiffened. “You don’t release me in the next second,” she said, “and I’m breaking the rest of your fingers.”

“Just stop and think about this. You’re scared, you’re angry—I get it. But what you’re talking about is only going to get you killed. Or turned into something. Then where will your son be?”

“Let me go, Croft.”

“I’ll use magic if I have to.”

“Do that and I really will arrest your ass this time.”

“I have an idea,” I said, working it out as I spoke. “Something far more likely to get results. Something much safer for you and your son.” I released Vega carefully, unsure whether she was going to resume her determined march or drive a fist into my face. I could see both impulses in her eyes.

“Talk fast,” she said.

“We meet with Arnaud through one of his blood slaves. See what he wants.”

“And where in the hell are we going to find one of them? Three are dead and at least another two took off with Tony.”

“Arnaud still has an interest in Ferguson Towers, which tells me he’s still keeping eyes on you.”

She took a second to absorb the info. “We’ll see.”

We descended the stairwell to the lobby and pushed open the steel door to the street. Bits of the lock littered the stoop where the blood slaves must have forced their way in. I peeked over at Vega, who was peering up and down the deserted sidewalk, eyes dark and mercenary. Since receiving the call in the storm line, she had maintained a rock-hard composure, the dials of her maternal instinct to protect all locked on ten.

Guilt burned through me as I considered my recklessness. I had gambled with Vega’s son and lost, goddamn me.

“Where are they?” she demanded.

I cupped a hand to the side of my mouth. “Arnaud!” I called into the night. “We’re here to do as you say!”

My words had barely echoed away when, down the block, a slender shadow separated from the side of a building and began

strolling toward us. The figure was dressed in a long black coat, formal shoes glinting beneath the streetlights. Vega and I turned our bodies to face him. When he had come to within a few feet of us, I recognized the monk's bangs.

"Well," Zarko said, "things have taken an interesting turn tonight, hmm?"

Vega drew her pistol and aimed it at his forehead—just what I was afraid she'd do. "Where's my son?"

"Hey, c'mon," I whispered. "We're not going to get anywhere that way."

"Your magic-wielding consultant is correct," Zarko said, his lips forking into a grin. "Especially when I presently hold the cards."

"Keep smiling, you piece of shit," Vega said. "This thing's packed with silver; not something your kind handles very well. Your buddies made a real mess of themselves in that tunnel under Madison Street."

"Oh yes, a pity." Zarko's hand gestures and turns of phrase suggested Arnaud was present in every way but form. "I *will* miss them. Fortunately, there is no shortage of ambitious young men in this city."

"Is he safe?" I asked.

"The detective's son?" Zarko smiled. "For now."

"Okay, you hold the cards," I said with a hard breath. "Just tell us what we need to do to get him back."

"My, that is a tricky one." Zarko clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace, unconcerned by Vega's pointed pistol. "I don't take broken promises lightly, Mr. Croft. And can I assume you have disclosed our little agreement to the detective? So there they are: two broken promises." He made a *tsk*ing sound. "And with a beautiful little boy at stake."

"You lay a finger on him…" Vega warned, eyes narrowed.

Zarko stopped pacing and spun toward her. "Though I have every reason, Detective, I am going to show some *humanity*, as your kind calls it. I am going to exercise restraint."

"What do we need to do?" I repeated.

"Well, it seems the first order of business is setting things to rights."

I didn't care for his chipper tone. "And how would we do that?"

"First, you're going to drop this business with Ferguson Towers." He showed a palm as I opened my mouth. "No more questions on the matter, Mr. Croft. I have told you all you need to know. Second, I have given you another lead, the name of a headmistress. I suggest you pick up there."

"Now?" I said.

"The sooner the better." His eyes cut to Vega. "For *all* concerned."

“I need proof that he’s all right,” she said.

“Very well.” Zarko reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a smartphone. He spoke as he tapped. “This is a live feed, though the location will have to remain undisclosed, I’m afraid.”

Not wanting to interfere with the technology, I stood back as Zarko held the phone out for Vega. The screen showed Tony curled on a couch in an affluent-looking room, sound asleep. A colorful blanket over him rose and fell with his breaths, his lips sputtering slightly. The boy seemed safe—were it not for the shadows of blood slaves drifting shark-like around him.

Vega nodded once, and Zarko returned the phone to his pocket.

“So, I stay away from Ferguson Towers,” she said, still training the gun on him, “and I go interview this person, and you’ll return my son unharmed?”

“It will certainly go a long way toward straightening the mess your consultant here made of things,” Zarko replied. “After that, we’ll see where the situation stands, how adept you’ve proven yourselves.”

“Selves?” Vega said. “Unh-uh, he’s not coming with me.”

“I’m sorry,” Zarko said, “but you and the professor complement each other far too well. I insist you work together. Consider it another condition for your son’s release.”

“I need a guarantee you’ll keep your word,” Vega said.

“Oh, Detective. You of all people should know there are no such things as guarantees. Odds. Chances. Those are life’s precious currencies. You will improve both considerably if you get started now.”

I nodded, knowing it was the best deal we were going to get out of him. Vega sighed as though arriving at the same conclusion and lowered her pistol from the blood slave. But Zarko was no longer there.

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"Look, I'm really sorry," I said.

Vega's gaze didn't shift from I-495 East, down which we were barreling at over ninety miles an hour, lights flashing.

"You're absolutely right," I went on. "I should have told you about my deal with Arnaud."

"Stop talking," she said coldly.

"Like I said, I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Did I stutter?"

"I just don't want you to think—"

"I don't give a shit about your feelings," Vega cut in. "My only goal right now is getting my son back. Whether or not you meant to put him in jeopardy, you did. That's the bottom line."

I tapped my cane slowly between my shoes, eyes fixed on the dull opal.

"And when I do get him back," she continued after several beats of awful silence, "you and I are done. No more consulting, no more calls. I don't even want you stopping in to wish me a Merry Christmas."

I struggled with something to say, but she was right about me, about everything.

"Are we clear?" she asked, glaring over at me for the first time.

A painful knot filled my throat. "Yeah."

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, we pulled into a semi-circular drive that delivered us to the front of the mansion-like school. Small floodlights illuminated white columns, dark-red brick, and sheets of English ivy.

As Vega and I stepped from the car, the paunchy security guard who had let us onto the grounds arrived in a golf cart. He hustled up the steps, a ring of keys jangling in his right hand. "Her room is going to be at the end of the main hall," he said, opening the front door for us. "Last door on the left. Just be careful not to wake the students."

Vega charged ahead without thanking him. I caught up to her at a door with a brass plate that read: Mrs. Poole, Headmistress.

Ignoring the security guard's directive, Vega knocked five times hard, the blows resounding up and down the hallway. A moment later, the door opened onto a tall woman in a white robe, graying hair pinned back from a worried face. She wasn't another vampire, in any case.

"You must be the detectives," she said.

"Detec*tive*," Vega corrected her, leaving me to explain myself.

"Consultant," I muttered.

"Well, come in," Mrs. Poole said, standing to one side and closing the door behind us.

We stepped into a carpeted administrative office. "Please, have a seat." Mrs. Poole gestured to a pair of chairs in front of a desk. She closed the door to a back room—her living quarters, I surmised by the tabby cat that had begun to poke its head into the office. Mrs. Poole joined us on the other side of her desk.

"Thanks for seeing me on short notice." Vega scooted her chair forward.

"Anything I can do to help," Mrs. Poole said. "But what is this about, exactly?"

Good question, I thought. *Arnaud sent us to you with absolutely no explanation as to why. And yet he seemed determined that we come out here—and not just to keep us away from Ferguson Towers. Vega already agreed to that.*

I snuck a peek at Vega, wondering how she planned to proceed.

"There was a murder in lower Manhattan a couple of nights ago," she began. "Two residents of a housing project had their necks bitten into. They died from loss of blood."

"Oh my," Mrs. Poole said, touching her own throat. "I'm very sorry to hear that, but I'm not sure what that has to do with me or my school."

Vega had given the bare facts to see if they would prompt the headmistress to volunteer something. She hadn't. I scooted my own chair forward, trying to anticipate Vega's next move.

"Are you aware of any cases like that in the area?" Vega asked.

"People having their throats bitten?" The lines of Mrs. Poole's face deepened. "Why, no, Detective."

"And your students are all okay?" Vega asked. "No attacks on campus?"

"No, nothing like that." Her eyes moved between us, as though beginning to sense we had come on a blind cast.

Something Arnaud had said through Zarko was sticking in my head: *After that, we'll see where the situation stands, how adept you've proven yourselves.* It was that last part: *how adept you've proven yourselves.* He wanted us to find something. He had already sent us to

Sonny, the vampire strip club owner, and now here. There had to be a connection.

"Well, if anything comes to you," Vega was telling the headmistress, "here's my card."

"Sorry I couldn't be of more assistance." Mrs. Poole rose as Vega did.

"Um, if you don't mind," I said. "I just have a couple of questions."

"No you don't," Vega said.

"I do, actually."

"I'm sorry," Vega said to Mrs. Poole. "My consultant suffered some head trauma earlier. He thinks he's an investigator now. That was all. We'll be leaving now."

"Have any of your girls left school since the start of the semester?" I asked quickly.

"Well, ah … two, actually," Mrs. Poole said.

"Did they give reasons?" I leaned away from Vega, who had seized my arm and was trying to haul me to my feet.

"Sheila's family moved to the west coast, and Alexandra left for unspecified reasons."

I gripped the chair's armrests. "Did Alexandra's parents sign her out?"

"She didn't have parents. She was a ward of the state. A private donor sponsored her attendance here." Mrs. Poole's eyes shifted between us in growing anxiety as we continued to struggle. "But Alexandra turned eighteen this summer. She was a legal adult and didn't need permission to leave the school. She'd been having some problems. Perhaps that's why she left."

Vega's grip eased from my arm and she turned toward the headmistress. "What kind of problems?"

"Oh, well, acting out, unexplained absences. A search of her room didn't turn up anything suspicious, but her behavior was enough to put her on probation and into mandatory counseling."

"Do you have her sponsor's contact information?" Vega asked. "Also, a photo of Alexandra would be helpful."

"That would be in our admissions office," Mrs. Poole said. "I can make a copy of her file."

"Please do." Vega sat back down as Mrs. Poole left the room. When I started to speak, she said, "Not a word."

I crossed my arms and quietly considered how Arnaud's two so-called leads might overlap. If there was a similarity between Sonny and the boarding school, it was young women. What if this Alexandra had gotten fed up with school and moved to the city? With few work prospects, she might have had no recourse but the Forty-second Street clubs. I pictured her arriving at *Seductions*, gazing up at the lurid

flashing marquee, then making the stomach-curdling decision to cross the threshold.

What then? Had Sonny bitten her? Turned her? My fists clenched at the idea of that sleazeball feeding on her foot. Had she become the creature we'd faced in the storm lines? Sonny swore he didn't turn his girls into anything, but there was a first time for everything.

Out of the blue, Vega said, "Why would Arnaud protect the killer while leading us to who she is? It doesn't make any goddamned sense."

"No, it doesn't. But vampires often follow their own logic."

"I wasn't talking to you."

I grimaced, but I had to admire her. Even with her son missing, she was still thinking about how to apprehend the creature and spare the residents of Ferguson Towers an all-out war.

"Sorry," Mrs. Poole said, returning to the office a few moments later. "It took a minute for the copier to warm up. Here's Alexandra's student file. I found an extra photo."

Vega accepted the stapled-together packet and looked it over. I scooted nearer and checked out the photo paper-clipped to the first page. The face above the girl's collared school uniform was sullen but pretty. Dark auburn hair fell in layers down the front of her shoulders. I tried to line the face up with the creature we'd battled in the storm line, but there was no resemblance. The girl's full name was Alexandra Mills.

"This is a P.O. Box," Vega said tapping the sponsor's information—a *Mr. John Smith*. "Do you have a physical address for him?"

"No, I'm sorry," the headmistress said. "That would be the only information."

"At least there's a phone number," I said.

Vega squinted as though my voice were an irritant.

"Are there any other questions I can answer?" Mrs. Poole asked.

I was about to shake my head when Vega surprised me by asking, "Did Alexandra have a roommate?"

"She did. Dominique Easly."

"I'd like to have a word with her."

Mrs. Poole looked at her wristwatch. "Right now? The girls are all asleep."

"It's important," Vega said.

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"Is Alexandra in some kind of trouble?" The colored beads at the end of Dominique's cornrows clicked as she looked from Vega to me and back.

"We don't think so," Vega replied. "We just have a few questions."

Vega was sitting on the other end of Alexandra's old bed from me. She hadn't used *we* to be inclusive, but to put Dominique at ease. The young woman sitting cross-legged on the bed opposite us was tense, fingers picking at the tassels of a throw pillow.

I glanced around a room that I could have sworn carried traces of spent magic, but nothing suggested that Dominique dabbled. Her room was a hodgepodge of school books, stuffed animals, and posters of inspirational messages, favorite singers, and shirtless hunks. Standard dormitory décor.

"What do you want to ask?" she said.

"How long have you known Alexandra?" Vega began.

"Since freshman year, but we didn't really become friends until last year."

"Is that when you decided to become roommates?" Vega asked.

"Yeah."

"Your headmistress said she started acting out," Vega said. "Missing classes. Do you know why?"

Dominique shrugged and dropped her eyes.

"Did *you* notice any changes?" Vega pressed. "Did she seem like a different person?"

"She just lost interest in some things," Dominique said, her gaze still lowered.

"When did she start using drugs?" I cut in, a shot in the dark. In my peripheral vision, fury radiated from Vega's eyes. But when Dominique's own eyes jumped up, they were large and rimmed with worry.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

She was too young to be a convincing liar. Vega must have seen it, too.

"You're not going to get anyone in trouble," Vega said. "Whatever you say stays between us. Not even Mrs. Poole will know. We just

want to help Alexandra."

Dominique glanced at her closed door, as though the headmistress might be standing inside it, then back at us. She sighed and leaned her arms against her thighs. "It was stupid," she said quietly.

"What was stupid?" Vega asked.

"I was visiting my aunt and uncle in the city this summer. They live in Brooklyn, sort of a junky neighborhood. Wasn't always that way, but after the Crash…" Vega and I both nodded for her to continue. "Anyway, I ducked over to the corner bodega for some coffee one morning, and I saw this tiny white envelope right outside the door, like someone had accidentally dropped it."

"Heroin," Vega said.

Dominique nodded. "I put it in my pocket and brought it back to the school. It was stupid. I could have been expelled, but I'd never done anything like that. I just wanted to understand what it was, how it could destroy lives, whole neighborhoods. But I was afraid to do it alone."

"So you talked Alexandra into trying some, too," I said.

"I swear it was only a little bit." Tears stood in Dominique's eyes. "Like this much." She pinched her first finger and thumb together. "And we didn't shoot it, we sniffed it, and then flushed the rest away."

Vega frowned. "Then what happened?"

"Well, you know, the drug started working. And yeah, it was strong. Real strong. I felt like I was riding these huge waves. But Alexandra, she turned into some kind of a monster."

I sat up straight. "Monster?"

"You know, storming around the room, knocking down furniture, throwing things. She cracked the window with her fist. Then she left. It was nighttime, eleven o'clock, and she didn't come back till the next day."

"Did she say where she'd gone?" Vega asked.

"She couldn't remember, but she didn't want to talk about it."

I snuck a look at Vega, whose eyebrows were bent in thought.

"But, yeah, she was different," Dominique said quietly. "She slept all the time, for one. That's why she was missing so much class. And when she was awake, she just wasn't there. She had the best laugh. Infectious, you know? But after that night, I never heard it again."

"Was she going out at night?" Vega asked.

Dominique nodded. "A few times I woke up, and she wasn't in her bed. I never asked her about it, though. A couple of times I saw blood on her clothes. She was starting to scare me." Dominique's lips moved silently before she was able to frame her next question. "Can heroin … can it cause, you know … mental illness?"

"No," Vega said. "It's been known to exacerbate existing

conditions, though."

"Oh God." Tears leaked from Dominique's eyes, and she wrung the pillow on her lap. "I did it to her." Her next words came out as sobs. "I made her s-s-sick."

"*If* that's what happened," Vega said, "you couldn't have known. It was stupid, but you couldn't have known."

Dominique nodded reluctantly and wiped her eyes with the collar of her cotton nightshirt.

"Have you heard from Alexandra since she left?" I asked.

"No. She didn't even say goodbye. When I left for class one morning, she was still in bed. When I came back after lunch, she was history, half her closet cleaned out."

"Do you know where she might have gone?" Vega asked.

Dominique shook her head.

"The city, maybe?" Vega prompted.

"Maybe. I have no idea."

I thought about what Mrs. Poole had said regarding someone paying her tuition. "Did you ever meet the person sponsoring her to attend Hangar Hall?" I asked. "A Mr. Smith?"

"Sponsor?" Dominique said. "I didn't even know she had one."

"Alexandra never mentioned him?" Vega asked.

"Nun-uh."

"Where would Alexandra go on holidays and summer breaks?" I asked.

"She was a foster kid—no relatives—so friends would invite her to stay with their families. She came down to D.C. with me last year. My brother and his wife live there. We had a blast."

"I'm sure she enjoyed that," Vega said, standing. "I'm going to leave you my card. If you think of anything else about Alexandra or if you hear from her, I want you to give me a call."

"I really hope I didn't get her into trouble," Dominique said.

As Vega reassured her that she hadn't, I leaned back until I could touch the floor on the far side of Alexandra's old bed. I ran my fingers along the gritty junction between floor and wall until I encountered a strand of hair. Pinching it, I sat up again. I cleaned the dust off the dark-auburn strand and placed it into an inner coat pocket.

Might come in handy.

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"Great," Vega said into her phone in a way that suggested whatever she had just learned was anything but, and hung up.

"What's up?" I ventured.

Vega returned the phone to her jacket pocket and narrowed her eyes at the highway ahead.

"Look," I said. "We're both after the same thing—piecing together whatever it is Arnaud wants us to find so we can get your son back. Wouldn't it be better if we worked together? I mean, there's a whole supernatural dimension to this that I know a helluva lot more about than you."

Vega passed two cars and a semi and veered back into the right lane.

"I screwed up," I said. "I admit it. You never have to talk to me again, just—"

"John Smith relinquished the P.O. Box last month," Vega said suddenly. "No forwarding address. The number on file is to a burner phone, untraceable, no longer in use. And there are a couple thousand John Smiths in the five boroughs—if that's even Alexandra's sponsor's real name."

"What about the payments to the school?" I said. "Checks or wire transfers would lead somewhere, right?"

"He mailed cash."

"So, whoever was financing Alexandra's education wanted to remain anonymous," I said, more to myself than Vega.

Why, on both counts?

"Is she the killer?" Vega asked bluntly.

"May I?" I said, reaching for Alexandra's student file on the dashboard. When Vega didn't answer, I lifted the packet and examined the photo more closely.

Could that one dose of heroin have triggered a change in the young woman? A transformation into a blood-thirsty creature? I thought of the bone-white monster in the storm line, the protruding jaw, the red eyes and long, muscle-roped limbs. If so, I wasn't aware of any similar cases. I needed my research books, but Moretti's men would have eyes on my apartment, dammit.

"Hard to say," I hedged.

"Thanks for your contribution."

"I did manage to pick up a hair in her dorm room, though." I patted the breast of my coat. "When we're back in the city, I can cast a hunting spell. If it pulls us back into the tunnels, we'll have our answer."

Vega knifed her eyes toward me. "You mean the tunnels below Ferguson Towers? Are you *trying* to kill my kid?"

"Okay, okay," I said, my face hot with frustration. "We'll put that on hold for now. If Arnaud expects us to make a connection, and all he's given us so far is Sonny and the boarding school, then we should pay Sonny another visit, see if he knows anything about Alexandra."

"I didn't need you to tell me that."

"Great," I said, replacing the copy of Alexandra's file on the dashboard and sitting back. "The vamp's place it is, then."

"SONNY!" Vega hollered. "Open up!"

She waited five seconds, then hammered the paint-chipped door with the side of her fist again. I peeked down the narrow stairwell we'd just climbed, the red lights of *Seductions* flashing over the sidewalk outside.

"Who's there?" Sonny demanded from the other side of the door.

"Detective Vega."

"I already talked to you."

"We need to talk again."

"We? Is that screwball wizard with you?"

Vega looked over at me. "It will only take a minute."

"Unless I'm under arrest," came Sonny's receding voice, "take a hike."

"Sonny!" Vega shouted.

When he didn't respond, she shook the knob and looked up and down the lock-riddled door.

"Stand back." I unsheathed my sword and aimed it at the door. *"Vigore!"*

My goal was to bust the locks, but the force that shoved me into the rear wall ripped the door from the frame and sent the whole thing somersaulting into the apartment. The door upended a couch and crashed into an entertainment center, a television screen exploding in white sparks. Piles of DVDs spilled to the floor.

The door had just missed Sonny, who was sitting at a card table over a plate of food, a towel bib tied around his neck.

"What the fuck?" he cried, hair whipping as he looked from his

displaced door to the two of us entering through the haze of dust.

"Maybe you'll answer next time," Vega said.

"Who's gonna pay for all this?"

We were close enough now that I could see what was on Sonny's plate: pig parts in a soup of blood.

"I don't know," Vega replied. "Maybe you can file a complaint with the NYPD. I'm sure they'll fall all over themselves to help an upstanding citizen like you."

As Sonny's left eyelid jittered faster, his lips pouched out. I imagined his set of retractable teeth emerging through his gums.

"Oh, no you don't." The tip of my sword met the center of his bloody bib before he could lunge from the chair.

In the time it took Sonny to shift his red-glinting eyes from Vega to me and back, Vega had drawn her service pistol. He sat back with a sigh. "Come in here and ruin my dinner," he muttered, yanking his bib from around his neck and spiking it beside his plate. "What do you want?"

Without lowering her pistol, Vega held out the photo of Alexandra. "Do you know her?"

I watched Sonny's face. For an instant the resistance etched around his mouth smoothed. But only for an instant.

"A lot of girls come through my establishment," he said, raising his eyes.

"Look again," Vega said. "This would have been in the last month or so."

"What'd you say her name was?"

"I didn't. Alexandra."

"Don't know any Alexandras," Sonny said. "And I haven't seen anyone that looks like her in the last month."

"Sure she didn't come looking for work?" Vega pressed.

"If someone had come to me looking like that, I would've hired her on the spot. My clients love the innocent schoolgirl type. Never goes out of style." His narrow nose leaked a snivel.

Frowning severely, Vega pulled the picture away from him. "Do you keep records of your hires?" She must have seen the same flash of recognition on his face that I had a moment before.

"What if I do?"

"I want to see all of your hires since August."

"Fine. Get a warrant."

"The NYPD doesn't exactly follow the letter of the law anymore," Vega said, retraining her pistol on his forehead, this time with both hands. "In case you haven't heard."

"What? You gonna shoot me?"

"I'd be doing this city a favor," Vega assured him.

"Oh, some pretty important people would beg to differ." Though he said it with a grin, his left eyelid was beating furiously. "You'd be surprised at the names my girls entertain."

I stepped forward. "Well, what if we circumvented your VIP list and called the Financial District?"

"Be my guest."

I caught the faltering defiance in his voice and leaned closer. "Remember our visit earlier today? Guess who sent us?"

"Think I care?" Sonny picked up a pig's leg by its pale hoof and sunk his teeth into the meatiest section. Pink blood dribbled down his chin as he sucked and slurped, the pig's tangy odor making me queasy.

"Arnaud Thorne," I said.

Sonny's narrow eyes flicked up at me.

The Arnaud part was true, of course. What I was preparing to say, not so much.

"He thinks you're mixed up in those messy murders at Ferguson Towers. And he's—how should I put it?—*deeply* concerned. So if I were you, I'd be doing everything I could to prove I had nothing to do with Ferguson Towers. Starting by showing us your hires since August."

"I already told you I don't turn my girls," Sonny said.

"Your hires," I repeated.

"Christ," he muttered, the shriveled pig leg splashing onto his plate as he stood and scrubbed his mouth with the bib.

TEN MINUTES LATER, Vega and I stood behind Sonny in his club office as he hunkered in front of a vertical filing cabinet.

"September," he announced, holding up a file behind him. "Aaand October." Another file appeared, and Vega took that one as well.

As Vega appropriated Sonny's desk to examine the files, I wandered the motley collection of filing cabinets against the back wall. Yellowing placards on the drawers listed months and years. Vampires were known to be meticulous, but holy hell—his records went all the way back to the 1980s.

"Impressive," I remarked.

"Hey, the city might be falling apart," Sonny said, "but I still get audited, if you can believe that shit."

"Cost of doing business, I guess."

"No kidding." He peeked over at Vega before sidling up to me and lowering his voice. He must have figured me for the good cop. "Hey, were you serious about Arnaud sending you and the detective down

here?"

"Serious as anemia."

"And he thinks I'm mixed up in those slashings?"

I shrugged, which seemed more threatening than a nod. Plus, it was more honest. I didn't know what Arnaud thought. All I knew—or rather, suspected—was that Arnaud wanted us to discover something that, for whatever-odd reason, he couldn't spell out himself.

"Christ," Sonny muttered, dragging his hands through his hair.

"Do all the women apply under their real names?" Vega asked from the desk.

"I make them show ID," Sonny said, turning toward her. "And I can always spot the fakes. I know you think I'm the scum of the earth, but no way am I gonna hire an underage girl."

Sure, I thought, *only because you know you'd get shut down.*

Vega looked over the files again, then closed them with a sigh.

"See?" Sonny said. "Told you I didn't know nothing about your school girl."

"But you recognized her," I said. "When you first saw the photo."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't screw with us," I warned. "Because when you screw with us, you screw with Arnaud."

Sonny held up his pale palms. "Look, I just thought she looked like someone who used to dance here."

"Who?" Vega asked.

"You know how many girls have come through these doors in the last thirty years?" Sonny said with a snort. "A thousand, probably. I can't remember all their names. I just thought your girl might've been one of them, until you told me it would've been in the last couple of months. The girl I was thinking of was here much longer ago. Fifteen, twenty years, at least."

The admission sounded incidental, but my wizard's intuition was tapping away, telling me we'd just found a shallow toehold.

Before I could press the vampire, Vega's phone went off.

"Rancho," she said, "what's going on?"

It took me a moment to place the name. Stiles's henchman, the bulky Mexican we'd met at the diner.

"When?" she asked coldly. "Okay. Thanks for telling me." She hung up and studied the phone's screen for a long moment, her face seeming to turn the color and texture of slate.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Vega squeezed her eyes closed, then opened them. "Another murder at Ferguson Towers. Same M.O. as the last two. Stiles is convinced it's Kahn, even though Rancho told him the drain in the boiler room was busted open. Stiles is mobilizing, but so is Kahn. The

war's going down tonight."

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I studied Vega's set face as she sped south on Broadway. "You heard the terms," I cautioned her. "'Stay away from Ferguson Towers.' I don't remember hearing a clause."

"Arnaud meant in relation to the murder investigation." Vega squealed around Union Square and onto Fourth Avenue. "I'm not going there to investigate. I'm going to stop a war."

"It's still a risk," I said. "Why don't you call for backup?"

"Even if they responded, that's just asking for a bigger blood bath."

"Vega, your son…"

Her eyes burst into black flames. "I know the fucking stakes, Croft!"

I stared ahead at the line of street lights, my cold hands wringing my cane. I shouldn't have pressed. Vega had made her decision. If sparing the lives of hundreds of children meant placing her own child in deeper danger, she had no choice. The vow to serve and protect was emblazoned on her soul. Like my magic, it was a part of her makeup.

A light rain began to streak the windshield as we approached Ferguson Towers. The sedan scraped over the curb and onto the sidewalk before barreling through the project's main gate. The water on the windshield spangled the lights of the east towers. Beneath the lights, hundreds of figures had amassed. On the far side of the plaza another army was gathering in front of the west towers.

"Shit," Vega spat.

She accelerated toward the east towers and slammed on her brakes. The front line of men pulled back as the sedan skidded around on the slick concrete and came to a sliding stop in front of them. I peered past Vega. The men wielded weapons, several of them aimed at the sedan. I was no expert on arms, but I recognized the green grenades jutting from shoulder rocket launchers.

"Hey," I said to her, "maybe we should reconsider—"

Vega threw her door open and got out. "Stiles!" she shouted.

Oh, Christ. I got out on my side and hustled around the car until I was beside her, the rain flicking my face. The armed men pressed forward until Vega and I were enclosed in a semicircle.

"Where's Stiles?" she demanded.

Murmurs went up about cops on their turf. As I looked from face to hostile face, I understood why Vega hadn't wanted to get a larger police force involved. The NYPD was just as much the enemy as Kahn.

"Stiles!" she shouted again.

The crowd shifted, and Stiles emerged in a boot-length leather coat, his shades and bald head glistening with water. "Ricki," he said calmly.

Vega stomped forward until she was standing in front of him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I could ask you the same."

"We had an agreement," she shouted.

"Yes, *had*," he said. "The situation changed."

"Bullshit!" Rainwater flew from Vega's mouth. "You were planning this stupid war before the latest victim turned up."

"I've told you in the past, you live by your rules, we live by ours. Rule number one is to never give ground to your enemy."

Vega stepped closer. "And I told you, *goddammit*, Kahn's not behind the killings."

"You've been gone too long, kid," Stiles said. "You're out of your depth. Shove off, and take Pasty here with you."

"She's right," I said, struggling to keep my voice from shaking in the sudden cold. "We're closing in on the perp. We almost had her apprehended earlier tonight."

"Where I come from," Stiles said, "*almost* doesn't mean much." Laughter erupted around him, and I could see how he had maintained control over his towers. In addition to whatever violence he wielded, he had the coolness factor down pat. But the line of his jaw suddenly hardened. Vega was pointing her pistol at him.

"Call it off," she said, "or I'm bringing you in."

Stiles shook his head. "Don't be stupid, Ricki."

Metal flashed, and two dozen barrels stared at Vega and me. I concentrated into my casting prism, ready to conjure a shield. *C'mon,* I thought to Vega. *I know you've got history here, but is this worth it?*

"Call it off," Vega repeated.

Grumblings went up, but Stiles silenced them with a raised hand. "Everyone chill. This is between me and Ricki."

"So what's it gonna be?" Vega asked, the rain water that beaded over her pulled-back hair beginning to trickle down her face. Her pistol didn't waver.

Stiles shook his head. "Still the same spitfire you were twenty years ago, never knowing when to back down."

"Yeah, well this isn't twenty years ago, and we're not arguing over whether you're two-timing me—which I knew you were. You've got

enough artillery to reduce the west towers to a sandlot. And I'm guessing they've got enough to do the same over here. Look around, goddammit. Look at all the lives you're putting in danger."

I peeked up the east towers. The same silhouettes I'd seen last night stared from the windows. It was the smaller ones, low to the sills, that bothered me the most, the ones belonging to children.

Though Kahn's army waited across the plaza, the aim of Stiles's sunglasses didn't shift from Vega's face.

"She's right, boss."

I looked over to see someone large pushing his way to the fore. It was Rancho, his own rain-streaked face tense and fearful.

"I-I've got a family up there," he said. "A lot of us do."

Several of Stiles's men shifted, necks craning back toward the towers. The movement created a shudder through the ranks, through Stiles's generalship.

"Is that right?" he asked calmly, drawing a black pistol from his waistband. "You're worried about your families?"

Rancho stepped back, the thick lump of his Adam's apple bobbing as Stiles raised the pistol.

"Hey, c'mon, man," Rancho said, showing his hands.

Stiles stared him down, then pivoted his arm and shot Vega pointblank in the stomach.

My heart stopped as Vega collapsed to the concrete. Stiles's men backed away.

"If you know how to drive, I suggest you collect your partner and get off my plaza." It took me a moment to realize Stiles was talking to me.

I dropped to a knee beside Vega. She was still alive, thank God, her breaths coming in choked gasps. The bullet had pierced the body armor in a small burst of mesh. There was no way to tell how deep the bullet had penetrated, but blood was seeping from the hole. A lot of blood.

Anger burned in my gut. "She was only doing her job."

"Did you say something to me?" Stiles asked, his voice even, menacing.

I rose and rotated toward him. "She was only trying to protect your residents."

"She knows better."

I had no more words for the cold-blooded creature. A man who would hurt a former friend, a mother, the most dedicated public safety officer I had ever met. I glanced around at the crowd through the tapering rain.

"Anyone with a family to protect," I said. "I suggest you go to them now."

“You don’t talk to my men,” Stiles said. “*I* talk to my men.” He raised his pistol until it was staring at my face. “I’m not going to say it again. Take your partner and get the fuck off my plaza.”

I stooped toward Detective Vega. Her cheek was pressed to the concrete, face clenched in agony. Rain water mingled with the blood from her wound and pooled pink around her knees. My intention had been to pick her up and load her into the car, to get her to a hospital. Instead, fury threw me into a pivot. Sweeping my cane in a wide arc, I shouted, *“Forza dura!”*

The force blew from me with the roaring power of a jet engine. It slammed into Stiles and his men, sending them airborne in a wave. A chorus of cries rose. Shoes and weapons spilled to the plaza. I glimpsed Stiles’s flapping leather coat before he disappeared into the wave of bodies crashing against the nearest towers. I drew my cane apart.

“Protezione!” I called, forming a light shield around Vega and me.

Bullets sparked off the glowing dome, but not from Stiles’s men. The commotion had spurred Kahn’s army into action. They were charging from the west towers, gun muzzles flashing.

I glanced around. Many of Stiles’s men remained down. Others staggered into the east towers. A few had reclaimed weapons and were firing back at Kahn’s men.

I looked down at Vega. I needed to get her out of here, but I couldn’t let the situation degenerate into the war she’d been trying to prevent.

Flares burst across the plaza and two, three rockets blasted toward us.

“Respingere!” I shouted.

The pulse from my shield pummeled the rockets, knocking them off their trajectory. They wriggled skyward and detonated like brute pyrotechnics, the Manhattan Bridge to the north flashing in and out of view. Shrapnel rained down over my shield.

Christ. My abilities had been developed to cast nether creatures back to their realms, not wage urban warfare. And with the fae magic still bolstering my powers, I possessed punch but not precision.

I opened a rear door of the sedan and scooped Vega up. She felt too limp as she sagged against me.

“Hang in there,” I said. “I’m going to get you to a doctor.”

I fed her through the door and lay her across the back seat.

I was pulling away when her left hand reached out and seized the lapel of my coat. Words hissed from her grimacing lips. “Don’t you … *dare* … put me in a hospital.”

She released me, her hand falling back to her wound. I read between the lines. A hospital would mean being sidelined, unable to

work on reclaiming her son. We'd have that fight later.

I slammed the door closed and grew the shield to enclose the sedan. Kahn's army had reached the plaza's center, and heavy fire was coming from both sides. Stiles's retreating men had taken up positions inside the apartments, gunfire flashing between window bars.

That's nice, you idiots, I thought, *drawing fire toward your families.*

A rocket launcher spewed gas from an upper-story window, and a missile dove toward the plaza. My force invocation was too slow. The missile detonated in front of Kahn's men, blasting back the advance.

How in the hell am I going to end this conflict?

The short answer was I couldn't. The best I could do was give the two sides a common enemy.

Me.

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I dropped into the driver seat and slammed the door. Vega had left the sedan running. It was a different vehicle from the one I'd driven in October, but the same make and model. I took a moment to refamiliarize myself with the controls before pulling the gearshift into drive.

I glanced back to check on Vega. "Hold onto something," I told her and waited for her to wrap a hand around one of the safety belts.

I stepped on the gas and peeled around until I was bearing down on Kahn's army. Bullets flashed off the shield that glimmered around the sedan. I felt the impact of bullets from the rear, meaning I was taking fire from Stiles's men as well.

Perfect.

Kahn's soldiers began to back away, then scramble from my oncoming vehicle. When I was almost to the front lines, I shouted, "*Respingere!"*

With the fae magic acting as a catalyst, the pulse from the shield detonated like a daisy bomb, blowing men as far back as the fence ringing the project. I steered through the fallen men and ruined weapons, careful not to run over anyone, then wheeled around and accelerated back toward the east towers. More shots rattled and popped, impacts flashing beyond the windshield.

With another shouted Word, my shield expanded rapidly, knocking back Stiles's men in the plaza. I cut the sedan hard right and steered toward the main gate. In the rearview mirror, I caught combatants from both sides giving chase, no longer shooting at one another.

How long the temporary truce would hold, I had no idea. But I'd done all I could.

The sedan's passenger side scraped through the gate in a sharp keening. I braked too late, launching off the curb and into the rusted husk of a car that had been left curbside. I cursed and reversed, then took off west, away from the chattering gunfire still directed at me.

I jagged left at the next intersection, then right, then left again pulling up to a four-way stop. I was far enough from the Towers that I dispersed my shield to allow my powers to recharge. I twisted around to peer into the back seat. "You all right, Vega?" I still had to figure

out where to take her.

I didn't notice the dark van slide up beside us, lights off, until my driver side door cannoned open. A fist crushed my jaw and wobbled my casting prism. A pair of hands seized the front of my coat, jerked me from the vehicle, and pinned me against the car's side. I stared at an unfamiliar face.

Wait … I do know you.

Stiles's sunglasses had no doubt come off when I'd blasted him. Now, small, nervous eyes stared into mine.

"You couldn't leave the Towers to us," he said, a bloody cement rash glistening over his right brow. "You had to come and interfere."

When he reared back to punch me again, I jabbed a thumb into his right eye. He grunted and released my coat. I dove for the open car door, for my sword, but he grabbed the back of my coat and swung me out. I slammed into the side of the van, head ringing.

I turned, fists raised, and threw a lunging punch. Stiles leaned away, a switchblade popping from his own fist.

We circled. I blinked sweat and rainwater from my eyes, tried to focus, but my head was too foggy to cast. The van's front doors opened and closed, and two of Stiles's armed henchmen took positions to box us in.

Stiles stepped forward and drove the blade at my gut. I skipped backwards, got my feet tangled, and fell to the street.

The ganglord stood over me. "I don't know what the hell you are," he said, holding up the blade. "But something tells me you still bleed."

A shot rang out. Stiles staggered to the side. One of his hands drifted to his throat. When it came away, he stared at his palm for a long moment. A gout of blood spurted from his neck. He dropped straight down, collapsing onto the seat of his coat, then fell against the side of the van.

I turned. Vega's pistol was pointing from the front door of the sedan. Stiles's henchman moved toward her, rifles aimed.

"Stand down!" Someone hustled up from a side street, a shotgun raised. It was Rancho. "I'm next in command, and I don't want any dead cops. Put Stiles in the van. We need to get him back to the Towers."

The henchmen hesitated before lowering their rifles. They pulled open the side door of the van and lifted Stiles's limp body. While they loaded him into the van, Rancho grasped my arm and hauled me to my feet. He helped me into the sedan, squinting into the backseat.

"You gonna be all right, Ricki?" he asked.

She nodded and lay back, the hand holding her pistol pressing against her stomach.

"Don't worry about the Towers," he said. "With Stiles out of

commission, I'll get them back under control." His gaze shifted to me, and he lowered his voice. "Don't let her die, motherfucker."

I nodded, and he closed the door.

"I'm taking you to a hospital," I said as I turned down Canal Street.

"You do, and I'll kill you," Vega whispered.

"Duly noted, but I've never treated a bullet wound before. And even if I knew what I was doing, my powers are all out of whack. I wouldn't be able to put any healing magic to it."

"There's a medical kit in the trunk," Vega murmured. "I'll tell you what to do."

I started to shake my head, but then I had an image of pulling up to an emergency room only to have Vega brace herself inside the car like a cat. I sighed. "All right. I'm staying at a place not far from here. But if I can't help you, I will take you to a hospital. No more arguments."

"Fine," she said. "Just shut up and drive."

I KICKED the apartment door closed behind me and set Vega on the bed in the back room. The medical kit I'd pinned beneath my arm fell to the floor. I stooped over Vega and freed the Velcro straps of her vest. She inhaled sharply through her teeth as I peeled the vest away. She was wearing an army-green wife beater underneath, its stomach plastered with blood.

I steeled myself before lifting the hem of her shirt to her sternum and tucking it beneath her sports bra. Her stomach was awash in blood. An angry hole stared up at me from beneath her right ribs. It opened and closed like a small mouth with each pained breath.

Vega lifted her head to see. "Oh, crap," she muttered, and let her head fall back.

Okay, that's not very reassuring. "Listen, you're going to be all right," I said. "But you have to tell me what to do."

"Bullet broke through the vest," Vega whispered. "But I don't think it made it through the muscle. Go ahead and open the kit."

I opened the medical kit and dumped the contents onto the floor.

"Put on the blue gloves and grab the peroxide and some gauze."

I sifted through the contents until I found the gloves in a plastic bag. I tore open the bag with my teeth and pulled the gloves on. I then ripped open a package of stacked gauze and twisted the cap from a brown bottle of peroxide. "All right," I said. "I've got everything."

"Pour the peroxide over the site." She wrapped her fingers around the edges of the metal frame. "Need to disinfect it."

"Do you want a countdown?"

She shook her head, eyes squeezed closed.

I tipped the bottle over her stomach, soaking it with peroxide. Her muscles clenched into a small six-pack as the peroxide foamed white in the wound. I wiped around the hole with a handful of gauze, sponging up the pink runoff. After several seconds, Vega let out her held breath in a grunt.

"Good, Croft," she whispered. "Now find the extra long tweezers."

"Got 'em," I said, tearing away the sterile wrapping.

"Have to get the bullet out."

"I was afraid you'd say that." I looked back down at the medical supplies. "Isn't there something I can give you for pain?"

She shook her head. "When morphine started disappearing from the kits … NYPD stopped including it."

"Wonderful." I swallowed and held the tweezers over the wound. "Just tell me if you need me to back off, all right?"

She nodded.

I winced as I lowered the tweezers into the opening. I tried not to touch the walls of flesh, as though involved in a macabre version of *Operation*.

I had only gone in a few millimeters when I encountered something foreign beneath the pool of blood. Vega's stomach tensed as I tried to grip the object with the tweezers.

"Sorry," I said.

"Just grab it, dammit. Grab it and pull it out."

I pressed the tweezers in more deeply, got a solid grip, and drew the flattened chunk of metal free.

"It's out!" I said, like someone who had just landed a fish.

"We're not done," Vega panted. "Look for a package labeled Celox."

I dropped the bullet and tweezers in the wadded-up gauze and looked through the contents of the medical kit. "Celox… Celox… Okay, found it." I picked up the metallic pouch.

"It's a coagulant," Vega said. "Pour it over the wound."

I opened the pouch too aggressively. The corn-meal-like granules spilled across her stomach, clumping where it met blood. Using a finger, I shoveled the Celox into the wound until it was full, then patted it down. I looked at Vega's face. She was sweating heavily, a forearm to her brow.

"Hey, hey, are you all right?"

She waved weakly toward the medical supplies with her other hand. "Just dress it."

I covered the wound with a small stack of gauze and then affixed the gauze with a compression dressing. I reinforced everything with medical tape. It didn't look half bad, but the mess around her was

another story. I appraised her soaked vest, the pile of dirty gauze. She had lost a lot of blood.

"Just need a little rest," Vega said. "Then we'll talk to a blood slave."

She wasn't going to be in any condition. "Why don't you let me?"

"Forget it."

"Why?"

"Because he's not your son."

I covered her with a clean sheet I had grabbed from my apartment and looked at her pallid face. A fresh wave of guilt at endangering her son, endangering *her*, crashed through me. She needed to be in a hospital. She needed blood.

I pulled my cane from my coat belt and looked at the opal. What was the bigger risk, attempting or not attempting to heal her through magic?

"Try it," Vega mumbled, an eyelid cracking open. "I'm going back out there regardless."

I had no doubt she would.

Setting my legs apart, I touched the end of the cane to the mound of dressing beneath the sheet. I leaned back against the power flooding toward my prism as I incanted, allowing only the smallest trickle through. The orb glowed softly, enveloping Vega in a thin, cottony haze of light. She murmured as her eyelids trembled closed.

I pulled energy back from the spell and broke it. The room dimmed again. I had given her as much magic as I was willing to risk. Hopefully it would be enough to jump-start the healing.

From one floor down, the room shook with the march of footsteps and doors opening and closing. The vampire hunters were home. I wanted to remain with Vega, to monitor her condition, but a quick trip downstairs could help fill in some holes in the Ferguson Towers murders. Such as why Bullet, Blade, and Dr. Z had been tracking the creature.

Vega had curled onto her side and seemed to have drifted off, her vulnerable body rising and falling in an even rhythm.

"I'm going to step out, but I'll be right back," I whispered. And then I did something I never would have attempted while Detective Vega was awake. I leaned down and kissed her cheek.

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"Mr. Wednesday Night," Bullet said upon answering the door, but without his usual enthusiasm.

"Mind if I come in?" I asked.

The giant of a man frowned his tattoo-patterned face and looked behind him, as though seeking approval from someone beyond my view. "Yeah, sure," he said, opening the door wider.

Blade and the green-haired Dr. Z were sitting on a couch, holding half-eaten slices of pizza. They had changed out of their battle gear. Blade now sported a camouflage tank top and Dr. Z a hooded shirt. Bullet joined them on the end, setting his shotgun beside the couch. Blade jutted her chin toward a greasy pizza box standing open on the coffee table. "Help yourself," she told me.

"Thanks, but I'm watching my complexion."

"How about a beer, then?" Dr. Z offered.

"Yeah, guess I could use one of those." I pulled a gold can from the six-pack on the table and settled into an old rattan chair facing the couch, the exhaustion of the day weighing on my bones. I cracked the tab and took a long drink. The beer went down warm and thick.

"Let me guess," Blade said, watching me lower the can. "You're a Jehovah's Witness and you want us to take a look at some pamphlets."

"I'm a consultant for the NYPD, and I want to know what you were doing down in the storm lines. Armed with silver weapons," I added.

"I thought you were a professor," Bullet said, biting into his pizza, the cheese stretching into strings as he drew it from his chomping jaws.

"I'm that, too."

"All the shit going on in this city," Dr. Z cut in, "and you're worried about *us*?"

"Look, you guys aren't in any trouble. In fact, I think we're after the same thing." The three of them fell silent, suddenly more interested in their dinner. "All right, why don't you start by telling me what happened after the detectives and I left? We all thank you for bailing us out, by the way."

"We followed a blood trail," Blade said.

"Detective Vega hit the creature with a silver bullet," I said,

nodding for her to continue.

"Well, by the amount of blood, I'd say she hit it pretty good. But the trail led to a mainline where water was really gushing, probably from an opened hydrant. That's where we lost the trail. And in that maze, forget it. We must have been down there for two hours before deciding to pack it in."

"The creature killed again," I said.

The three of them looked up. "Where?" Blade asked.

"The Ferguson Towers Project. We think she's climbing up through the storm drain." I wondered now if the creature's injury had driven her to feed. "How did you learn about her?"

"Someone hired us," Blade said.

That much I had guessed. "Who?"

"Sorry," Blade said. "We guarantee our clients complete confidentiality. It's one of our selling points."

When I could see she wasn't going to budge, I relented and took another swallow of beer. "Fine. Why don't you just tell me what you know about the creature?"

"She's a hybrid," Blade said.

"A hybrid? Of what?"

"Vampire and werewolf."

"More of the first than the second, though," Dr. Z put in.

I had never even heard of that, but I supposed it was possible. "Hybrid by birth?"

"Could be," Dr. Z said. "But there's always the lightning strikes twice scenario. You know, some unlucky bastard getting the lycanthrope infection, then later being turned into a vampire."

"And someone hired you to put this one down?"

"We don't chase after these things for our health," Blade said.

"No, I guess not. Care to tell me your next move?"

"And tip off our competition?" Blade smirked. "In case you haven't noticed, we're a little cash starved." She glanced around a living room of second-hand furniture, sagging punk posters, and stacked amps.

"I think I can convince the NYPD to let you have this one." Especially since that would free us up to focus on Arnaud's leads. I just prayed he hadn't already taken punitive action against Vega's son.

"Well, thanks to your blundering into the tunnels," Blade said, "who knows where the creature ended up. It won't be lairing in that little service room again, though, I can tell you that much. It's too smart."

"And damn near invincible," Dr. Z said. "Those silver bullets you were packing wouldn't have done the job."

"No?" I set my beer can down with a shaking hand. Some consultant I'd turned out to be. "How do you kill a hybrid, then?"

Dr. Z drew a finger across his neck. “Decapitation, baby.”

“We’ll probably have to wait for it to strike again,” Blade said. “That’ll give us an idea where it’s holed up.”

I remembered the hair in my coat pocket, the one I had collected in Alexandra’s dorm room. If she *was* the creature, a hunting spell could lead us to her. But the creature wasn’t my immediate priority. That honor went to Detective Vega’s son. Which meant taking up Arnaud’s game again, connecting the dots he was setting out for us until a picture emerged.

“How did you know to look underground?” I asked.

Blade chewed slowly on her next bite of pizza, as though considering what to divulge. “We were told the same thing as you,” she said at last. “That the creature was using the storm drains.”

Only we weren’t told that, I thought. *Vega and Hoffman figured it out. Which suggests that whoever hired you three either has access to the case file or to someone working the case.*

“Can I assume your employer is someone powerful then?” I asked.

Blade and Dr. Z gave me poker faces, but I caught Bullet, the weak link, glance quickly down.

Blade tossed her crust into the box and closed the lid. “Time’s up, Everson. Dr. Z and I need to rehearse. Big show next week. If you can promise to keep your pants on, you’re welcome to come.”

“One last question,” I said, ignoring the dig. “With this job, have you been meeting any resistance from the vampires?”

Dr. Z snorted. “Only about every time we turn around. Too bad no one’s paying us to knock off blood slaves.”

“Any idea why?” I asked as I handed them cards with Vega’s contact info.

Blade shrugged. “Someone hired us to kill the hybrid. Maybe someone hired a vamp to keep it alive.”

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I rushed to where Vega stood at the side of the bed, adjusting her service belt around her waist. Her wife beater was dark but no longer bloody. She had already rinsed it in the sink and wrung it out.

"What are you doing up?"

"I didn't want to sleep too long," she said. "Whatever you did helped."

When she raised her face, strands of damp hair clung to her brow. Though her color remained pale, it had improved from only a half hour ago.

"I still say you need your rest. You lost a lot of blood."

She ignored the comment, wincing as she straightened. "Where did you run off to, anyway?"

"That trio that helped us out with the blood slaves? They're squatting in the same building." At that moment, the muted sounds of electric guitars came up through the floor. "They've been hired to hunt the creature. That's why they were down in the storm lines."

"Hired by who?"

"They wouldn't tell me, but I say let them hunt it."

Vega nodded as she stepped past me. "I agree for once. Now let's go find Arnaud's spokesperson, see where things stand."

"That won't be necessary." I held up a piece of paper. "It was stuck in the door when I got back here."

Vega snatched it from me, her eyes already moving over the spidery script. I came around behind her and reread the message:

Your return to Ferguson Towers violated the letter of our agreement, but perhaps not the spirit. I am giving you the benefit of the doubt and will consider the detective's injury penalty enough. Rest assured, the boy remains safe in our care. As for the leads, I applaud your thoroughness thus far. It seems you are making progress. Keep it up, and the conditions for the boy's return will soon be fulfilled. I have another person you will no doubt find interesting. I advise you to see her forthwith.

Lady Bastet

"The name ring a bell?" Vega asked.

"Not from personal experience, but yeah. Lady Bastet lives in the West Village. She also happens to be a mystic."

"An old woman with a crystal ball?"

"Old in years, maybe, but not looks. And I don't know about the crystal ball, but it wouldn't surprise me. That address is for a rug store she owns, but her real business is divination and spells."

"Good mystic or bad?"

I considered the question as I retrieved my revolver. "Neutral."

"Think she'll be open this late?"

"Probably, but you're going to need something warmer." I dug into one of my duffel bags and pulled out a gray sweatshirt I had planned to sleep in. "Here." I tried to help Vega into it, but she pulled it out of my hands and put the sweatshirt on herself, rolling up the sleeves to her wrists.

"Let's go," she said.

A PLAIN SIGN over the sidewalk pointed down a staircase to Lady Bastet's basement-level business. Despite Vega's assurances that she was all right, I had her keep a hand on my shoulder as we descended. I had already seen her stumble once.

At the bottom of the steps, an old wooden door creaked open before I could knock. A striking eye with a white kohl peered out.

"Yes?" a woman's voice asked.

"Lady Bastet?" Vega said, shouldering me aside. "I'm Detective Vega with the NYPD. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"And who is your handsome associate?" She spoke in an accent that was hard to place.

"That's Everson Croft. A consultant."

Lady Bastet opened the door until we were looking at a dark-skinned woman in a white peasant blouse. A gold band with an ankh symbol in its center held a pile of dark hair from a face whose subtle age lines enhanced her appearance. Lady Bastet smiled at me with lush lips, then seemed to tease me with her cat-green eyes to follow. It was a compelling look.

Vega shot me a consternated glance as Lady Bastet led us through a display room of Middle Eastern rugs to a back room. The space smelled of harsh incense and magic. As cats squinted at us from various perches, Lady Bastet gestured for us to sit at a stone table in the room's center. After covering what looked like a scrying globe

with a cloth, she joined us on the table's opposite side.

"You are missing someone close to you," she told Vega.

Vega set her jaw. "We're investigating a series of murders, and we'd like to ask you some questions."

"As a consultant?" Lady Bastet asked.

"As a person of interest," Vega replied.

I half expected Lady Bastet's eyes to widen in alarm. Instead they pinched at the corners, as though she were smiling inwardly. Perhaps our visit had livened up an otherwise dull night.

"Please," she said, opening a hand of long nails. "Proceed."

"I'm going to give you some names," Vega said, "and I want you to tell me whether they mean anything to you." She took Alexandra's photo from the file and pushed it across the table. "This is Alexandra Mills."

Lady Bastet lifted the photo. "She is beautiful."

"Do you know her?"

"Beautiful and tortured," Lady Bastet went on. "It is there in her eyes, as though something is fighting to claim her very soul. She is winning, though. At least at the time of the photo."

"You haven't answered my question," Vega said.

Lady Bastet placed the photo on the table and slid it back. "I am sorry. Sometimes the impressions just come." When her gaze touched mine, she might as well have winked. "No, I do not know her."

Vega's shoulders slouched as she returned the photo to the file. "How about a Sonny Shoat? He runs an establishment on West Forty-second Street called *Seductions*."

Lady Bastet repeated his name. "Do you have something of his I might touch?"

"I'm not asking for a reading," Vega said, her voice thinning with frustration. "I'm just asking if you know him."

"I do not deal with those types."

"What types?" Vega asked.

"I think you know."

She meant vampires, which put us in a quandary. If she didn't know Alexandra or Sonny, why *had* Arnaud sent us to her? I peeked over at Vega. With her mundane line of questioning all but exhausted, I decided it was time to take a supernatural tact.

"What sorts of services do you offer?" I asked.

"Readings, divinations, communication with the deceased. Spell work, occasionally."

"What kind of spell work?"

"That depends on what my client wants," Lady Bastet replied. "And what they are willing to give."

I noticed she didn't say *pay*.

My eyes roamed the room in thought. The space was crowded but neat. Cats large and small crouched on shelves stocked with items like crocodile teeth, falcon feathers, and the colorful shells of scarab beetles.

I nodded toward a clutch of dried purple flowers. “I see you have wolf’s bane,” I said. “Do you ever treat clients infected with the lycanthropic virus?”

“From time to time, yes.”

“Ever encountered a werewolf-vampire hybrid?”

“Once.”

“An infant, right?” I said. “About eighteen years ago?”

Now Lady Bastet’s eyes did widen slightly. “May I ask how you know this?”

I glanced over at Vega, who had one hand turned up as though to say, *Were you ever going to tell me you’d figured something out?* But the pieces had snapped together in the last moment. Sonny the vampire … The creature we had encountered in the storm line … The remnants of a spell I had sensed in Alexandra’s old dormitory … Lady Bastet’s reaction to the photo.

Alexandra hadn’t worked for Sonny. Her mother had.

“Someone brought an infant to you,” I said. “A young woman, I’m guessing. She was worried about her little girl’s … makeup. She asked you to cast a spell to fix her, to make her human.”

“But I could not,” Lady Bastet said, picking up the story. “She had not been infected by a werewolf, nor had she been turned into a vampire. Those elements belonged to her by birth. As such, I could only suppress her vampire and werewolf natures, keep them from maturing.”

“Through a powerful binding spell,” I said.

“May I see the photo again? Yes,” Lady Bastet said after Vega had handed it to her. “I remember the eyes. So intelligent.” She sighed sadly. “Am I to presume the spell has been broken?”

“About two months ago,” I said. “Alexandra took a powerful street drug. Detective Vega and I happened to visit the room in which she ingested it, and I detected the remnants of the binding spell.”

“It probably occurred on or near the full moon,” Lady Bastet said. “This Alexandra would have gone into the wilds at night, fed on the blood of animals, and then slept in the daytime to avoid the most intense light.” I nodded, remembering what her roommate had told us. “Eventually, she would have developed a craving for human blood. It would have been irresistible to her. Are you trying to find her?”

“Yes,” Vega said.

“No,” I said over her. “Well, not right now. We’re trying to find the mother.” Something still told me that was what Arnaud was after. “Do

you remember her name? Anything about her?"

"She did not give me a name. She was young and frightened, though she hid both well. I noticed she had no wedding band. She looked a lot like this young woman." Lady Bastet tapped the photo with a fingernail.

I turned to Vega. "Do you remember Sonny's reaction to the photo? How he said it reminded him of an employee from decades earlier."

"He knew the mother," Vega said.

"Intimately," I added. "Because he's Alexandra's father."

"That son of a bitch," she whispered.

I turned back to Lady Bastet. "Did you treat the mother, too?"

"She did not ask me to. Perhaps because she was not a full-blooded werewolf."

"What did you charge the mother to help her infant?" I asked.

"Her hair."

"Her hair?" Vega said.

"She had very powerful hair, the color of wild honey, all the way to her waist. Her wolf nature gave it added potency. Some of my most powerful enchantment spells came from that hair."

"Do you have any left?" With even a single strand, I could cast a hunting spell.

"I am afraid not. Word spread quickly. The supply could not keep up with the demand."

Crap.

"Can you, I don't know, *divine* anything about her whereabouts?" Vega asked.

"Do you have something that might connect me to her?" Lady Bastet asked.

"We have no idea who she even is," Vega said.

"Then I'm sorry."

"Wait." I reached into the inner pocket of my coat and withdrew the long strand of Alexandra's hair. "This belonged to her daughter."

Lady Bastet accepted the hair and drew it between her finger and thumb. "A cellular as well as an emotional connection." Lady Bastet's lips turned up at the corners. "Most powerful."

"Will it work?" Vega asked.

"That depends on what you are prepared to give."

"What do you charge?" Vega asked, already pulling out her wallet.

Lady Bastet's attention shifted to me. My skin tingled uncomfortably as her kohl-lined eyes roamed my body. At last her gaze returned to mine, and she smiled again. "His blood."

"What?" Vega said.

"Not all of it." Lady Bastet stood and retrieved a clay tube from a

shelf. “This much.”

I sized up the tube. She was clever, asking just enough to weaken my powers without it being a deal breaker. But I was more concerned with how she planned to employ my blood. Wizard’s blood could be used in powerful spells. And if those spells took a dark bent, the wizard was on the hook with the Order—especially if said wizard had given his blood willingly.

I glanced over at Vega, who was watching me for my answer, one hand to her bandaged stomach. “It’s a deal,” I said. Before I could reconsider, I pushed up my right coat sleeve and placed my arm on the table.

“Very good.”

I shuddered as Lady Bastet’s fingernails caressed the network of veins on my upturned forearm. She uttered an incantation, and the veins bulged in a painful spasm. Drawing what looked like a wooden needle from her hair, she said, “You’ll feel a small prick.”

She placed the needle against an especially thick vein. A second later, the needle bit into me. A greedy suckling commenced, and I watched blood fill the clay receptacle she held below the needle’s other end.

When the tube was full of dark blood, Lady Bastet pulled the needle free and capped the container. With another incantation, the puncture closed and my veins relaxed. Giving the tube a light shake, she whispered, “Perfect.”

She shooed away a cat perched on a small wooden box and placed the tube inside among some others. Back at the table, she removed the cloth from the scrying globe. The pad of her first finger caressed the length of Alexandra’s hair as she whispered in old Egyptian.

The marble-like pattern of the globe began to shift and glow.

“The mother is in the city,” Lady Bastet said after a moment. “She is involved with disreputable people, but she cannot disentangle herself from them, like she did Sonny. The years have made her more wily, though. She uses them.”

I glanced over at Vega, who mouthed, “John Smith.” I nodded. Alexandra’s sponsor. He was connected to the mother somehow. And if he had been paying Alexandra’s tuition in cash all those years, he was someone of means. Lady Bastet stared into the globe until I couldn’t help myself.

“Is there a man in her life?” I asked.

“Because the hair is not hers, I see only glimpses of those around her. There are two men of significance, though. One strong, the other weak. Power binds her to both. Not love.” Light seeped from the globe and it stopped shifting.

Lady Bastet raised her eyes. “I have told you all I can see.”

“No name?” Vega asked.

The mystic’s gold hoop earrings rattled when she shook her head.

“There’s Sonny’s files,” I said to Vega as Lady Bastet covered the globe. “Alexandra’s date of birth gives us the year she was conceived, probably when her mother worked for Sonny. Going name by name through the file for that year, Sonny should be able to make the match to the woman he remembered, the one who looked like Alexandra.”

Vega nodded and stood. “Thanks for your help,” she told Lady Bastet.

“Are you sure there is nothing else?”

“Not right now,” I said.

Vega hesitated. “Actually… a friend of Everson’s is missing.”

I looked at her in surprise. Vega tilted her head toward Lady Bastet. I pulled out my wallet, digging through the leather sleeves until I found Caroline’s business card from the College. I slid it halfway toward the mystic, then stopped. “What are you asking for this time?”

“We will discuss payment afterwards.” Lady Bastet’s lids fell slightly as she stroked the card. The globe returned to life and glowed against her face.

But after only seconds, the globe dimmed again.

“I am sorry,” Lady Bastet said. “Your friend is no longer in this world.”

My heart stopped for a beat before lurching into a sick rhythm. “Wh-what do you mean?”

The black cloth the mystic draped back over the globe looked like a funeral shroud.

“That is all I can tell you. And for that, I ask nothing.”

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"You going to be all right?" Vega asked.

I looked from the dark storefronts skipping past on Seventh Avenue to Detective Vega, who had insisted on driving despite her bullet wound. They were the first words either of us had spoken since leaving Lady Bastet's.

"Still processing," I replied numbly. "But her pronouncement could mean a couple of things besides, you know…" I swallowed.

My best hope now was that Angelus had taken Caroline to the faerie realm.

"If there's something you need to do, I can probably take it from here."

I shook my head. "No. I'm the reason we're in this mess. The priority is getting your son back safely. I'll look for Caroline afterwards. Anyway, Arnaud insisted we work together."

"All right. Let's just take a few minutes to make sure we're on the same page." Vega coughed weakly into her fist, wincing at the pain in her stomach. "This mother, who has werewolf blood in her, has a child with Sonny, and they give birth to a—what did you call it?"

"A werewolf-vampire hybrid," I said.

"The mother takes the hybrid to Lady Bastet, who casts some sort of spell to keep her as human as possible. Then the mother puts her child, Alexandra, in the care of the state. Years pass. The mother's left Sonny, but she gets involved with some disreputable people."

"People with the money to pay the tuition at the boarding school."

"Yeah," Vega said. "Which tells me 'John Smith' is probably the mother."

I paused to consider the P.O. Box and burner phone. "You're probably right. Great catch."

"Alexandra seems to be doing all right at school, but her roommate brings home a street drug. Heroin laced with God knows what. Alexandra takes it and … it breaks up the spell somehow?"

"With the kinds of forces that spell was holding back," I said, "it might not have taken much. Sort of like a tire that gets nicked on the highway. First little bits of rubber start flicking off, then huge chunks, until you're down to rim."

“And she became a werewolf-vampire?”

“Right.”

“But what brought her to the city?”

“Help? Answers? A larger food supply?” I shrugged. “There’s no telling. Not with the information we have.”

“So why is Arnaud protecting her?”

I thought about what the vampire hunters had said right before they kicked me out of their apartment. “Maybe he isn’t protecting her out of self-interest,” I said. “Maybe someone hired him to protect Alexandra.”

“The mother?”

“Seems the most likely candidate. But it still begs the question: Why is Arnaud having us chase leads to find out who the mother is if he already knows? I mean, look at what he’s given us so far: the creature’s identity, the father’s identity, the fact the mother brought the creature to Lady Bastet. He doesn’t *need* us to connect the dots.”

“Then there’s the question of who hired the vampire hunters to kill the creature.”

“Ah,” I said. “I actually have a lead there. Who did you inform about your trip into the storm lines?”

“So far? No one.”

“Did you write it down anywhere, like in a report?”

Vega shook her head. “There wasn’t time. I was planning to write the report after.”

“So you didn’t tell anyone?”

“No, Croft. Just you and Hoffman.”

“Hoffman,” I groaned.

“Why?”

“When I asked the vampire hunters how they ended up in the storm line, Blade said, ‘We were told the same thing as you. That the creature was using the storm drains.’ Which can only mean someone got that information from Hoffman and then passed it along.”

Vega’s eyes narrowed as she shook her head. “He knows he’s not supposed to share info on an investigation without my authorization.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not exactly up for a Meritorious Police Duty award.”

“All right, I’ll call him after we deal with Sonny.” She pulled up curbside near the staircase leading to Sonny’s apartment.

I got out and came around the car to find Vega leaning against her car door, holding her stomach.

“Let me take a look,” I said.

“I’m fine.” She pushed my hand away.

“If you’re bleeding again…”

“I’m not.” She strode toward the staircase.

I followed, watching her closely. I could sense the dose of healing magic I'd applied earlier still moving around inside her. She really needed to be resting for it to work, though.

At the top of the steps, I could see where Sonny had leaned his blown-out door against the frame. The spaces around the door's edges were dark.

Vega knocked. "Sonny? It's the NYPD."

When no one answered, I lifted the door and walked it a few feet into the living room, setting it against a wall of risqué *Seductions* calendars. Vega slipped past me, her sidearm gripped in both hands. She cleared the living room and turned toward the hallway.

"Sonny?" she called again.

As I drew my cane apart, my gaze dipped to Vega's stomach. A small point of blood had struck through the sweatshirt. She'd lied, dammit. She was bleeding through the dressing. Before I could say anything, she disappeared down the hallway. I poked my head behind the kitchen counter. In the sink, I glimpsed Sonny's dinner plate, the pig parts sucked dry.

A light flicked on in a back room. "Croft," Vega called.

I followed her voice to a bedroom of purple walls and thick black drapes. She nodded at the king-sized bed. Sonny lay spread-eagle in its center, a blade-shaped hole puncturing his crusty chest. With the death blow, centuries of aging had collapsed back into his body, claiming him in an instant. He looked like a mummy.

"Any idea who would want him dead?" Vega asked.

I circled the bed, remembering what Arnaud had told me on the pier: *Sonny has been involved with many people. And for some, that's a problem.* "The question is why someone would want him dead *now*."

"Maybe someone observed our earlier visits," Vega said.

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking."

I leaned over Sonny's body. Several small perforations pocked his face. I reached into my coat, pulled out my notepad, and drew the pencil from the spiral binding. With the pencil's sharpened tip, I probed a perforation on his cheek until I encountered something hard.

"What the hell are you doing?" Vega asked.

I pried a small shot free and placed it in my palm for Vega to see. "Silver ammo," I said. "I'll bet you anything it's the same ammo that did damage to Blondie earlier tonight."

"The vampire hunters?"

I nodded, thinking of Bullet's pump-action shotgun. "Did Hoffman know we interviewed Sonny?"

"He knew about our first interview, yeah. I told him before he went off in search of the plans for Ferguson Towers." Vega's eyebrows crushed down as she made the connection. "That means he turned

around and informed the person who hired the vampire hunters."

"The client must have thrown in a bonus for Sonny."

"Kill the hybrid, kill its origin story," Vega said.

"Tells me someone wants to bury the matter in the worst way." A disturbing thought came to me. "Did Hoffman know about our trip to the boarding school or to Lady Bastet?"

"I didn't tell anyone about those."

"Good. Let's keep it that way." The world wasn't going to miss Sonny, but I didn't want innocents becoming targets. "Let's head down to Sonny's office. I want to check out those files."

"Why? All he has down there are names and tax IDs. They won't mean anything to us. The whole point of coming here was to get *him* to identify her." She shot Sonny's corpse an exasperated look that seemed to blame him for his own death.

"Well, we won't know unless we look."

"WHAT DO YOU KNOW?" I said, stooped in front of the file cabinet drawer labeled *2001*.

"What?" Vega came up behind me.

"The entire second half of the year is missing."

"Probably when Alexandra's mother started here," Vega said. "The mysterious client had the vampire hunters grab six months' worth of hires to bury the name he or she was trying to hide."

I lifted out the files for the first half of the year.

"What are you doing?" Vega asked.

"Here." I handed half of the files to her. "Look for any unusual last names. Dancers who would be easy to track down. If they were hired before Alexandra's mother, they might still have been here when she came on board. They might be able to give us a name. We can show them the photo of Alexandra. Seems she inherited her mother's good looks. She sure doesn't resemble Sonny."

"A blessing for her," Vega muttered.

We carried the files to Sonny's desk and set up on either side.

I was halfway through the March hires when a name jumped out at me.

"Hey," I said. "That dancer who came into the office earlier today. What did Sonny call her?"

Vega grimaced. "You mean besides 'sugar'? Casey."

"There's a Casey right here. And didn't Sonny say she'd been with him for almost twenty years?"

At that moment, the door to the office opened, and the six-and-a-half-foot bouncer who had admitted us poked his head in. "You two

gonna be in here much longer?"

"As long as it takes," Vega told him.

"It's just…" The bouncer scratched his curly hair and glanced behind him. "I know you're police and all, but the boss don't like people nosing around his stuff. He might smile and play nice when you're here, but he takes it out on the rest of us when you're not. He's got a temper like a pit bull."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem anymore," I said.

"Where can we find Casey?" Vega asked.

"Casey? She worked a double today. She's in the dressing room on a smoke break."

"Can you ask her to come in here?" Vega said.

"I can ask."

The bouncer disappeared. A minute later, Casey stood in the doorway in a pink silk robe, her red hair pinned up in a messy pile. She placed a hand on a cocked hip, a stench of cigarette smoke and perfume radiating off her.

"What?" she demanded.

Vega gestured to the chair next to mine. "Have a seat."

"Why?"

"Relax," Vega said. "We just want to ask you a couple questions."

Casey shot me a sour smile as she landed in the chair.

"Is your full name Casey Lusk?" Vega asked.

"What if it is?"

"Do you remember when you were hired?"

"No."

"Does March 2001 ring a bell?"

"Not really." She crossed her long legs.

"A young woman was hired shortly after you," Vega said, pulling out Alexandra's photo and placing it on the desk in front of Casey. "She would have looked like this, but with hair to her waist."

Casey scowled at the photo.

"You knew her?" I took out my notepad.

"She played little Miss Innocent, but she didn't fool me. Manipulative piece of trash. Had Sonny wrapped around her pinky finger. She even got him to propose to her." She let out a sharp laugh. "Can you imagine that? Sonny? Married?"

"Can you give us a name?" I asked.

"Chastity Summers," Casey said with exaggerated sweetness.

I jotted the name down and looked up to find Vega's dark eyes staring back at me. I nodded. We might have just connected the final dot. But man, the detective was not looking good. Way too pale.

"Whatever became of Chastity?" Vega asked.

Casey shrugged. "Hell if I know. She was here for about six months

and then took off. Sonny moped for the next year. Serves him right, the dumb bastard. Tried to warn him she would rip his heart out."

"And she never showed up here again?" I asked.

"Nope."

"Do you know anyone who might've kept up with her?"

"Kept up with her? We all hated her." Casey glanced around before leaning forward and lowering her voice to a husky whisper. "But I know for a fact Sonny hired some sort of private investigator to look for her. Didn't find shit." She gave a self-satisfied snort as she sat back.

"Thanks for talking with us," Vega said. "You've been very helpful."

"That's it?" Having attained a degree of authority, Casey was reluctant to relinquish her chair. I felt a prick of pity for the aging dancer as she stood slowly, tugging her robe by its fraying hem.

"If anything else comes up, we'll be in touch," I assured her.

After Casey left, I looked at Vega. "Think we have enough?"

"I'd like more info on this Chastity," she said, "but if a P.I. couldn't track her down almost two decades ago, I doubt we'd do any better."

"Lady Bastet said she's in the city."

"Still a needle in a haystack, especially since Chastity wouldn't be Chastity anymore."

"Think she changed her name?" I asked.

"I'm sure of it." Vega spun her chair from the desk and stood. "Let's go out and see if we played Arnaud's game to his satisfaction." She took two steps toward the door and collapsed.

I caught her before she hit the floor and lowered her the rest of the way, one hand under her head. The stomach of her sweatshirt featured a fist-sized spot of blood. I didn't have to look underneath to know the bandage was a sopping mess.

"Detective," I whispered, patting her cheek.

Her eyelids fluttered open, and I watched her pupils sharpen. "Did I trip?"

"You passed out. You're running on empty."

"I'm fine." She sat up and blinked as though to straighten her vision. "Just stood too fast." She extended a hand for me to pull her to her feet. I complied, wrapping an arm around her waist to steady her.

"Would you stop?" she said, elbowing me away.

"Would you let me help you?" I cried. "You can't do this alone."

She wheeled on me, staggering slightly before regaining her footing. Though her body was about to wilt, her dark eyes burned with emotion. "We'll worry about me after this is over. But I am *not* going out there to face the creatures holding my son with you propping me up. Got it?"

I relented with a sigh. "Am I allowed to catch you, at least?"

Vega turned and opened the office door onto the beating lights of the club. I followed, hoping to hell we had met Arnaud's terms. Vega wasn't going to be able to hold out much longer.

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We emerged from the club and looked up and down the block of flashing marquees and pay-by-the hour hotels. If blood slaves were lurking among the skeletal street walkers, I couldn't spot them.

"Arnaud!" Vega called, her voice hoarse.

When no one appeared after several moments, I hooked a thumb toward the sedan. "He might want to meet someplace less public. Why don't we drive a few blocks and park?"

Vega shivered as she nodded.

"I'm going to have to ask for your keys, though," I said.

"So you can finish the demolition job you started at the Towers?"

I *had* banged up her car pretty badly. But Vega relented, slapping the key chain into my palm. She shivered again as she dropped into the passenger seat, eyes closed, the cuffs of the sweatshirt I'd loaned her balled inside her fists.

I cranked the engine and turned up the heat. I was about to pull the gearshift into drive when I caught the silhouette of someone's head and shoulders in the backseat. I wheeled with my revolver.

"At ease," Zarko said, almond eyes glinting red in the darkness.

My heart slammed through my breaths. "You could've given us a little warning."

"I just thought the detective would want to meet out of the cold," Arnaud said through his blood slave. "She is not looking at all well, is she?"

I peeked over at Vega, whose eyes remained closed.

"Chastity Summers," she said. "That's the name of the mother."

"*Was* the name of the mother," Zarko corrected her. "But I think you know that."

Rage burned through me. "Can't you see the condition she's in?"

He gave a mysterious smile. "But you are so very close."

"To what?" I shouted.

"The truth."

"Look." I paused to control my voice. "Just release her son, let her get some medical care. We'll continue the search. We'll find out who this Chastity Summers is. You have our word."

"Amend the original agreement?" Zarko chuckled. "I wouldn't

think of it. Besides, it would seem we are in a race against someone intent on keeping that information in the dark, no?"

"Look at her, for God's sake. The situation's changed."

"No, Mr. Croft. The situation has only become more interesting. I have placed associates of my own at stake. I have even lost a few. It would only seem fair that you have skin in the game as well."

"Is that what this is to you? A goddamned *game?*"

"A figure of speech, Mr. Croft, I assure you." The smile on his lips thinned. "The revealed truth would have profound consequences. Why, it could change the very landscape of this city. Why do you think someone is going to such great lengths to suppress it?"

"But you already *know* the truth," I said.

"A truth I can do nothing with at the moment."

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Perhaps I have already hedged my bets, and there is no gain in it for me. I am an investor after all. And the best investors cover all sides of a trade. *Or*…" The word lingered, teasing, on his tongue. "Or perhaps it is that you are not the only ones bound by an agreement."

Vega stirred in the passenger seat. "Does this have something to do with you being hired to protect her daughter?"

"Very astute, Detective. There is hope for your son yet."

I expected the not-so-veiled threat to light a fire in Vega, but she remained slumped against the seat back, eyes closed. With her blood loss, everything probably seemed dull and hazy. "He's still safe?" she asked.

"Sleeping like an angel."

"And once we find out who Chastity Summers is," I said, "you'll release him?"

"Yes, but you should be quick. While the boy sleeps, a little blue vessel on the side of his neck pulsates away. My associates have taken an interest in that conduit of precious fluid. I have control over them, of course. But as that interest turns to real hunger, why, a brief lapse on my part…"

"If he's hurt," Vega mumbled, "I will hunt you down myself, and I will kill you."

"What energy!" Zarko said, laughing. "Yes, take that spirit and rally yourself. I would hate to see you fail at this late stage and with so much at stake. The truth is not as distant as it might seem—especially for you, Detective. Find out who wants the creature dead, and the answer will reveal itself like a magician's coin."

In a burst of cold wind, the rear door opened and closed, and the backseat was empty.

I sighed and looked over at Vega, who was fumbling for her smartphone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Hoffman," she said. "Need to find out who he's been supplying info to."

"Wait," I said, holding out a hand just enough to freeze her display. "Let's think about this for a minute. If Hoffman knows he's doing something below board, he'll deny it. Not only that, he'll tip off whoever he's informing. Instead of confronting Hoffman, what if we laid a trap?"

"What kind of trap?"

"We debrief him on the investigation, leaving out the parts about the boarding school and Lady Bastet, of course. Tell him we're close to knowing the mother's identity. We'll put together a file of fake names and contact info—leads you'll instruct Hoffman to follow up on. Whoever Hoffman's talking to is going to want that file. We'll see what Hoffman does with it."

"Tail him?"

"Even better, I can infuse the file with a hunting spell."

She nodded weakly. "Fine, but you were right, dammit. I'm not going to make it without some blood."

"There's a medical center a few blocks away."

Vega shook her head and scrolled through the contacts on her smartphone. "No hospitals. I have an EMT friend who owes me a favor." She tapped a number and activated the speaker. "Larry," she said when a man's voice answered. "It's Detective Vega. You on duty?"

"Yeah, what's up?" he said.

"I'm gonna need an ambulance for an emergency blood transfusion. B positive. One unit should do it. Is there somewhere I can meet you?"

The voice hesitated. "You're bringing the victim to us?"

"I am the victim."

"Oh, geez. Yeah, yeah. Where are you now?"

"Near Forty-second and Broadway."

"Okay, how about in the valet garage across from Grand Central?"

"How soon can you be there?"

"I'm headed there now." The sound of a siren rose through the speaker.

Vega hung up. "You heard the man."

THE AMBULANCE WAS ALREADY WAITING, its rear doors open, when we pulled into the garage. I parked and ran around to Vega's side before she attempted to stand. A portly man in blue coveralls and with

graying hair appeared from the ambulance and jogged up to her other side.

"Christ, kiddo, what in the hell happened to you?"

"Stopped a bullet with my stomach," Vega said as she staggered between us toward the ambulance. "Thanks to my vest, it wasn't deep. But I lost some blood. Everson removed the projectile."

"All right," Larry said. "While the drip's going, I'll stitch up the wound."

We helped her up into the ambulance, where she collapsed onto a waiting gurney, the interior lights bleaching her remaining color. While Larry busied himself with the IV bags, Vega clutched my coat sleeve.

"This is gonna take about an hour," she said. "If you need to do something for your friend, go ahead."

My gaze dropped to the spreading stain in her sweatshirt.

"That's an order," she added.

I pulled up a mental map of Manhattan. The fae townhouse was a straight shot north, about thirty blocks. I could be there in under ten.

"You sure?" I asked.

She shoved my arm toward the door. "Go."

"All right, but…" I patted my coat pockets until I felt the pager in its iron case. "Call if you need me back before then."

She nodded, then looked down at where Larry was inserting a line into the crook of her left elbow.

I checked my watch: 2:40 a.m. I hopped from the ambulance and jogged to the sedan. As I wheeled the car around, I caught the first droplets of blood filling the tube to Vega's arm.

"Fifty-nine minutes to find Caroline and make it back," I whispered.

I sped from the lot.

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I pulled up a half block from the townhouse and parked. When I squinted, the narrow domicile across the street wobbled into focus for a few seconds before the veil pushed my gaze to the neighboring address. I squinted again. Light glowed from the four ascending windows, which was no surprise. The nighttime enhanced fae magic, and so the fae were more active at night.

Active enough to show their faces outside the townhouse, I hoped.

Without time to cook up a spell, I lacked the ability to break through the threshold. That left a stakeout. As I replaced the silver bullets in my revolver with iron ones, I replayed the sequence of events surrounding Caroline's disappearance, starting with the gala.

Angelus pursues Caroline and asks to speak with her. She wants nothing to do with him until he mentions her father. While they're talking, I catch something about "a fair exchange." I head out with Hoffman to the crime scene, and Caroline and Angelus apparently leave the gala together, Angelus casting a glamour to look like me. The next morning, Moretti's men come to my apartment, looking for her. That they were hired by Caroline's father tells me she really is missing. I get the address to the fae townhouse from the night hag, only to be stonewalled by the butler. But he knows where Angelus is, and probably Caroline. Fast forward to the meeting with Lady Bastet and "She's no longer in this world."

That Caroline might be in the faerie world was nothing to feel optimistic about, but it sure as hell beat the alternative. Judging by the secrecy of the townhouse, and the sudden burst of voices I'd heard while talking to the butler, I was willing to bet there was a portal to that world beyond the threshold.

I clicked the cylinder of my revolver home and scanned the street in front of the townhouse. I just needed someone to show up who could give me some damned answers.

"Well, what do we have here?" I whispered.

A Clydesdale clopped into view from down the street, pulling a dark carriage. In front of the townhouse, the horse slowed to a stop. A man in a black top hat and cape climbed down from the driver's bench and opened the carriage door. Laughter bubbled out as a well-heeled man and woman appeared on the carriage's far side. Their

formal dress and the woman's blatant show of jewelry, coupled with their being out so late, screamed "fae."

I climbed over the sedan's center console and exited on the passenger side. Using the cars parked curbside as cover, I slinked along the sidewalk until I was across the street from the carriage.

The man handed something to the driver, who bowed, climbed back onto the carriage, and snapped the reins. The horse and carriage moved away, leaving the frosted-haired couple giggling on the sidewalk. The woman took the man's arm in an exaggerated stumble, and the two broke into louder laughter.

Drunk fae. Even better.

I waited for the sound of the horse to diminish before jogging across the street. I pulled up behind the couple and drew my revolver.

"Stop right there," I said.

The couple looked at one another, then wheeled clumsily.

"This thing's loaded with cold iron," I said, "so I want you to listen."

"And who are you?" the man asked in a vaguely English accent.

"I'm looking for someone. I'll release you as soon as you can tell me where she is."

Their drunkenness seemed to have subdued their magic as much as their reaction times. They continued to blink at one another and at my revolver, their faces a blend of surprise and amusement.

"Well, are you going to tell us who you're looking for?" the man asked.

"Caroline Reid."

The woman's face brightened. "Caroline Reid?"

"You know her?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. A lovely, *lovely* young woman." She turned to the man. "You remember her, honey? She came over to interview you about your time in Mayor Alito's administration."

"What?" I said.

"For a book she was writing," the woman said, wavering on her feet. "We have a signed copy on our…" She hiccupped and circled a hand as she tried to come up with the word. "…our *mantel*."

I looked from the woman to the man. *Were* they fae?

"Who are you?" I asked.

At that moment, the door to the townhouse opened, and a pale rectangle of light spilled into the street. I squinted at the slight figure bisecting the doorway. "Mr. and Mrs. Darby? Is everything all right?"

I couldn't make out his face, but I recognized his voice. The butler.

"Oh, fine, Jasper," the woman slurred. "We were just chatting with our new friend here."

"Hey!" I called, swinging my revolver toward the butler. "Stay

right there!"

"I suggest you come inside," the butler said to the couple. "It *is* late after all."

The well-dressed man staggered as he turned to me and bowed. "Very nice to meet you."

"Yes," the woman called over a shoulder. "And please tell Caroline hello for us. Such a dear."

I tried to climb after them, but I couldn't seem to lift my feet, which had suddenly taken on weight. The same leaden weight forced my revolver arm down until the weapon clicked against a stone step. I watched the couple disappear through the light and into the fae townhouse. The oppressive weight dropped me to both hands and knees, and I tried to crawl. Soon, I couldn't even do that.

"Good evening, Mr. Croft," the butler said with stern finality.

"Wait…" My lungs could barely fill the word. I strained to breathe against the growing pressure.

The butler receded into the townhouse, the light narrowing until the door clicked closed. Whatever enchantment he had cast released me, and I could inhale a full breath again.

I stood from the steps and whispered an incantation to test my magic. The barest force rippled through me. My powers were in remission again. Fan-flipping-tastic.

"Thought we might find you here," a stuffy voice said.

I wheeled to see Floyd and Whitey stalking up the sidewalk, Floyd with a triangular cast over his busted nose. Both were wielding their vintage Colts. I backed away, wondering how in the hell they had known to come here, when I remembered my conversation with Mr. Reid in the Escalade. I'd given him the street.

"That was some stunt you pulled on the pier," Floyd said. "And getting your buddies to jump in?"

I glanced around as Moretti's men strode nearer, but something told me Arnaud's blood slaves wouldn't be bailing me out this time. Once Vega received her transfusion, she would be able to connect the final dot, find out who the mother was. Arnaud didn't need me anymore.

"This is the house," I said, pointing up the steps. "This is where that guy took Caroline."

"You're wasting your breath." Floyd raised his gun.

"Why the hell else would I be standing out here at three in the morning?"

"The hell should I know? To make yourself look innocent? Anyway, I don't know what house you're even talking about."

I glanced over. *Damn. The veiling spell.*

"Drop the gun," Whitey said in his raspy voice.

“Sorry, guys. I’m not leaving here until I find Caroline.”

“Drop the gun,” Whitey repeated, cocking his hammer.

“Yeah, I heard you the first time. But I’m pretty sure Mr. Reid doesn’t want a dead body attached to his name.”

“Yeah, but Mr. Moretti does,” Floyd said. “You just popped up on our list.”

“Mr. Moretti?”

“Shut it,” Whitey said to his partner. I read the narrow look he shot Floyd. They were planning to collect twice on me. First from Mr. Reid for extracting the information on his daughter’s whereabouts, and then from Mr. Moretti for delivering a hit on me. I adjusted my slick grip on my revolver.

“You want to know where Caroline is?” I nodded past them. “Ask him.”

Still wary from their surprise beat-down at the pier, Floyd and Whitey chanced peeks behind them. But I wasn’t bluffing. Someone was walking up, and that someone was Angelus.

He was wearing the style of suit I’d seen him in at the gala, formal and dark, the shirt underneath his jacket open at the collar. He approached from the direction of Central Park, as though returning from a nighttime stroll—completely insane for anyone but a powerful supernatural. I squinted past him in the faint hope of seeing Caroline, but he was alone.

A half block from us, Angelus slowed, but he didn’t stop. I trained my revolver on him. Moretti’s men glanced between us, their guns still on me, but their faces now squinting with uncertainty.

Angelus drew up to within a few feet of us and stopped. “Is that Everson?”

“You know damn well who I am,” I said. “You assumed my appearance when you left the gala last night. What did you do with Caroline?”

“Caroline is fine,” he replied neutrally.

“I didn’t ask how she was. I asked what you did with her.”

“I coerced Caroline into nothing.”

Despite my cold fury, I noted the precision with which Angelus was answering my questions. The fae were master deceivers, but they couldn’t lie. “Where is she?” I asked, stepping closer, revolver pointed at his chest.

Floyd and Whitey stood off to either side, eyeing our exchange.

Angelus’s face, a handsome bronze when he had arrived, now greened a shade. He was reacting to the iron bullets in the revolver. I watched for the least sign he was preparing to cast magic.

“Where is she?” I repeated.

“Caroline is home,” Angelus said.

“Bullshit, buddy,” Floyd cut in. “Whitey and I were just over there.”

“Where’s home?” A sickness crawled around my belly as the first line of an obituary scrolled through my head: *Caroline Reid was taken home to be with her Lord on the night of…*

Angelus looked at the three guns aimed at him and raised his gaze to the townhouse. “It’s late, gentlemen.” His slate-blue eyes fell back to mine. “And I’m sure we all have places to be.”

“You don’t get it.” I stepped over to cut him off. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me where Caroline is and how I can reach her. Try to force your way past me, and I will shoot you. I know for a fact cold iron kills your kind, especially when it’s blown through your heart.”

“Yeah,” Floyd put in.

“You will not kill me, Everson Croft,” Angelus said calmly.

“Oh, no?” I applied pressure to the trigger.

“Your magic is weak, but I can read it like the stars. You have never used it to perform ill. And as goes the magic, so goes the man. Now if you will excuse me.” He raised a hand as though to step past me.

I fired twice. First into Whitey’s chest and then Floyd’s. They dropped like sacks to the pavement. I trained the gun back on Angelus.

“This ain’t magic.”

Angelus studied the two dead gangsters. “I do not wish to harm you, Everson.”

“That’s pretty funny, considering which end of the gun you’re standing on. I’m through screwing around. I catch even a whiff of enchantment coming off you, and you’ll be joining them.” My heart slammed harder at what I was about to ask. “Is Caroline still alive?”

“Goodnight, Everson.”

Angelus stepped past me, and I squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. When I squeezed again, my revolver moved. I looked down and hollered. In the place of the revolver, a hermit crab-like creature with a black shell clung to my hand, its hairy legs pricking my skin.

I swore and tried to shake the creature off me. Angelus’s magic was so subtle I hadn’t felt the transformation. The creature hit the pavement and scuttled away into the shadows.

I wheeled and lunged for Angelus. If he reached the door, I’d lose my only lead to Caroline. My fingers touched the back of his jacket, but before I could grasp it, the material turned as slippery as a buttered pan. My fingers scrabbled against it, and I fell forward onto the sidewalk.

Angelus jogged up the steps.

Something in my pocket dug against my hip as I rolled and pushed myself to my feet.

Wait. The pager.

I reached into the pocket and gripped the casing. Cold iron. I yanked out the pager and winged it at Angelus. The pager struck him in the low back. He grunted and seized the spot with both hands as though he'd blown a lumbar disk. The pager clattered to the bottom of the steps. I picked it up mid-stride, palmed it in my right fist, and took the steps three at a time.

"You're not going anywhere," I said.

When Angelus twisted around, I shot the iron-loaded fist into his mouth. Something broke beneath my knuckle. He clutched my jacket. I reared back and threw another punch. The looping blow caught him behind the ear. We went over together, tumbling down the steps. When we hit the sidewalk, I straddled him and mashed the pager against his cheek.

"I want answers, goddammit," I panted.

Angelus squinted up at me from a scraped and bleeding face that had taken on a blue hue. Though the iron was dissolving his glamour, he still bore the sharp angles and self-possession of royalty.

"Where is Caroline? And I don't want to hear that she's *home*. I want a fucking location, an address."

"She's where she belongs."

"See? That doesn't help me, either."

I pressed the pager harder until Angelus hissed and smoke began to curl from his face. When his pupils shrank, I noticed a pale light had fallen over us. The door to the townhouse had opened.

"Everson," someone said, but it wasn't the butler.

A hand to my brow, I squinted up to find the light filtering around an angelic being.

My breath caught. "Caroline?"

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She wore an airy gown, a white cape fluttering from her shoulders. Light from the townhouse shone through her golden, brushed-down hair, but it seemed longer than Caroline's. She stepped forward until she stood at the top of the steps.

"Caroline, is that you?"

I pushed myself off Angelus and climbed the steps cautiously. Fae power glimmered around the woman, something I had *definitely* never sensed around Caroline.

I came to within two steps of her and stopped. It was Caroline. And yet … it wasn't.

She regarded me with blue-green eyes, almost too intense to meet.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"You shouldn't be here, Everson."

"What's happened? What have they done to you?"

"I'm fulfilling an agreement made on my behalf."

"Agreement? By who?"

"My mother."

She had never mentioned her mother before. And what connection would her mother have had with the faeries? Unless…

"She was a fae? Your mother?"

"*Is* a fae, Everson."

"So you're, what, half-fae?"

"Yes, but I relinquished that part of my heritage as a girl."

I grappled with the seismic revelation. "I … I had no idea."

"Just as I had no idea the power you wield. But I can see it around you now, a living force."

"I meant to tell you."

"As I meant to tell you." Her voice carried a hint of sorrow, as though something had been lost.

I glanced back at Angelus, who remained down on the sidewalk.

"What was the agreement?" I asked Caroline.

"Not now, Everson. You should leave."

"Please. I've been worried sick about you."

She studied my eyes before dropping her gaze with a sigh. "My mother is royalty. She rules a kingdom parallel to New York. She met

my father when the fae were active in human politics. They fell in love, they had me. But the fae can be whimsical. She left my father without his knowing what she was. As a part-fae, I had a choice—to embrace my fae nature or become fully human. I chose the second, severing all connections with that world. For years I had no contact with my mother."

"What changed?"

"My father's sick. He was diagnosed with cancer this summer. He'd been undergoing aggressive treatment, but the cancer wouldn't budge. Angelus told me my mother was willing to heal him, but on the condition that I honor the agreement she made before I chose mortality."

A cold shadow moved through me. "What agreement?"

Caroline's eyes shifted past me. Angelus joined her on the top step, his glamour restored. "That we be wed," Angelus said, slipping an arm around her waist, "as it was decided."

I moved my gaze between them. "Wait, you're *married?*"

Caroline tilted her head and touched my arm, which was answer enough. That was what Angelus must have meant at the gala by "a fair exchange."

"How?" My heart felt as though it had been punched numb. "When?"

"I made the decision after you left the party. To reclaim my fae nature and accede to the arrangement my mother had made. I wanted to tell you, but the window was closing. The ceremony had to be performed before the full moon, and there were days of preparation involved."

"Days? But the gala was last night."

"The wheels of time rotate differently in our worlds. A day here could be a week there. I thought I would be able to complete the ceremonies and return before anyone knew I'd been gone."

"Well, why the deception?" I demanded. "Why did pretty boy here assume my form? What in the hell was that about?" I wasn't sure whether I was more angry at Angelus now or Caroline.

"That was my idea," she said. "Angelus has advised the opposition, and I didn't want word getting back to Mayor Lowder or my father that I'd been seen leaving with him. I hope that didn't create any problems for you."

"Problems? Oh, just a few."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Can I talk to you alone for a minute?" I asked.

Caroline looked over at Angelus—her frigging *husband*—and nodded that it was all right. I bristled as he kissed the side of her head and then walked into the townhouse, closing the door behind him.

Without the backlighting, Caroline seemed almost mortal again.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"It wasn't an easy decision, of course. But yes."

"I don't know a lot about the fae," I said, "but they have a reputation as manipulators. How do you know they didn't give your father his illness? I mean, maybe your mother's taken a fresh interest in New York politics. If so, I can't think of a more valuable asset than you."

"Believe me, Everson, I thought about all of that." She lowered herself to sit, her gown spilling down the steps like mist. "But it wouldn't have changed the fact that my father was dying."

I sat beside her and gazed out over the still street. We could have been back on the balcony overlooking Central Park the night before, all of this talk of the faerie realm and arranged marriages a distant dream—or nightmare.

"Do you love him?" I asked.

"I told you, it was arranged."

"Why Angelus?"

"His father has a small kingdom in a realm parallel to upper Manhattan."

"Two kingdoms on Manhattan Island?"

"Several kingdoms, in fact. The island is much larger in the faerie realm, more like a small continent. But the societies are feudal, arranged marriages between ruling families common. Angelus may seem cold and formal, but he's … he's decent."

"I bet he is," I grumbled. "So now what?"

"I'll have duties in the faerie realm as well as here." She turned up her palms. "This is all new to me, Everson. I guess I'll just take it a day at a time."

"And your job at the college?"

"I'll keep that for the time being."

I swallowed. "And us?"

When she looked over at me, her eyes glimmered with emotion. "I'm married now."

I nodded vaguely and dropped my gaze to my hands. *Figures. The only woman I really loved as an adult.*

The pager went off, Vega signaling she was ready.

"Well…" I slapped my thighs and rose. "I guess that's that." As incredible as it seemed, I had forgotten about Floyd and Whitey until their fallen bodies entered my peripheral vision. "Just do me a favor and let your father know you're all right. I think he was worried about you."

"I will."

I descended the step. "Goodnight," I said without looking back.

“Everson.”

I didn’t stop. She caught up to me on the sidewalk and grasped my arm.

“Look,” I said, turning. “You don’t have to—”

Her lips pressed against mine, silencing me. I tasted the subtle power of the fae, like spring water and honeydew. Her soft hands held my cheeks. I raised my own hands, clasping the backs of hers. Worlds spun around us.

When at last Caroline broke away, tears shone on her face.

“I am sorry,” she whispered.

“Yeah. So am I.”

She gave a final sad smile before climbing the steps and disappearing into the fae house.

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When I swung the sedan into the parking garage across from Grand Central Station, Detective Vega was sitting on the rear step of the ambulance, a blue blanket over her shoulders, Larry the EMT beside her. I pulled up in front of them and got out to open the passenger side door.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

Vega shed the blanket and climbed into the car. "Good enough."

"She let me give her a unit of red and half a bag of saline," Larry said. "She could really use another of each, but she promised me she'll go to an ER whenever you two wrap up whatever you're doing."

"And we're off the books on this one?" Vega asked.

"What books?" Larry made a shooing gesture with his hands. "Go on, get out of here. Go save New York."

We pulled out of the garage and onto Lexington Avenue.

"I've already called Hoffman," Vega said. "He's going to meet us at the office downtown. How did everything go with—"

"She's fine," I interrupted.

"So she wasn't missing?"

"Yes. Well, no." I stared at the empty road ahead. "It's complicated."

"O-o-okay."

I changed the subject. "Did Hoffman sound suspicious when you talked to him?"

"No, but he seemed a little too interested when I told him I had info on the creature's mother. Probably can't wait to get his grubby hands on it so he can run it to whoever he's informing."

"I think it's Mr. Moretti."

"The washed-up gangster?"

"I ran into a couple of his men just now," I said. "One of them let slip that I'd popped up on Mr. Moretti's 'list,' which I can only assume meant his hit list. Think about it. Someone has Sonny killed but without knowing what the vampire might have told us. So he has to play it safe—"

"And eliminate us, too," Vega finished.

"But I think our plan buys us time. Mr. Moretti's going to want to

know exactly how much we know. That info will be in the fake file that Hoffman will hopefully deliver to him."

Vega was silent for a moment. "Why Moretti, though?"

I'd done some thinking on the drive back from the townhouse. Lord knew I'd needed to occupy my mind with anything but the bombshell Caroline had dropped on my heart. "The hit was the first clue," I said. "I then went back over what Arnaud told us outside of Sonny's. He said, 'The truth is not as distant as it might seem, especially for you, Detective.' That last part didn't click for me at the time, but Little Italy is just a few blocks north of your office, right?"

"Moretti's fiefdom."

"And think about Arnaud's parting advice: 'Find out who wants the creature dead, and the answer will reveal itself like a magician's coin.' A coin has two sides, right? So if one side is Moretti, the other side is probably—"

"His wife," Vega said.

"I met her last night at the gala. She fit the bill. Long, auburn hair, orange-tinted irises. And she had this feral air about her, like she wasn't entirely human. That could be accounted for by werewolf blood."

"That also fits with what Lady Bastet said about her being mixed up with disreputable people. The Italian mafia isn't what it used to be, but it's still plenty criminal. And there's probably enough in the till for the wife to have helped her daughter without anyone in the organization noticing."

"I didn't sense a lot of love between Mr. and Mrs. Moretti last night, either," I said.

"But why is he so desperate to cover up his wife's past?"

I shrugged. "To protect their reputation? The man's been trying to wheedle his way back into the upper echelons of organized crime in the city—*honorable* organized crime, as he probably thinks of it. Maybe he considers having a homicidal creature for a daughter a handicap."

"Maybe," Vega said, but without sounding convinced.

"We'll find out for sure, in any case. What time did you tell Hoffman?"

"Four thirty."

I checked my watch. "All right. That gives us enough time to create the file and for me to put a spell…" My voice petered out as I remembered the fae's neutralizing effect on my magic. I powered down the window and aimed my cane at the approaching street light.

"What are you doing?" Vega asked above the roaring wind, a hand to her whipping hair.

"A test," I said. *"Vigore!"*

I watched for the street lights to rock on their wires. With even a small return of my powers, I could cast a weak hunting spell, something that might hold up provided it didn't start raining again.

The street lights erupted in an explosion of sparks. Wires snapped, and one of the traffic-light bodies plummeted onto the roof of the sedan before clunking away behind us. I drew my cane back into the car and powered up the window.

"Successful test?" Vega asked thinly.

"Yeah," I said, reflecting on Caroline's parting kiss.

I wasn't sure, but I think she had restored my powers.

"So what do we got?" Hoffman asked, waddling into Vega's office in one of his polyester suits.

"The list of women I mentioned." Vega tossed the file of fake names and addresses onto the desk. A light blue aura that only I could see hummed around the manila folder. "I want you to follow up. They're all in the city."

Hoffman squinted over at me with naked disdain as he grabbed the file and dropped into the chair next to mine. He flipped it open and frowned over the list. "And you're sure the mother's one of these?"

"Almost positive," Vega said.

"Where'd you get the info?"

"A nightclub owner named Sonny," Vega said. "The one we talked to earlier."

Hoffman nodded and tucked the folder under an arm. "I'm on it." Halfway to the door, he stopped and turned. "Oh hey, were you able to find your kid?"

"Yeah," Vega said.

"And he's all right?"

Vega's eyes dropped to the folder. "He will be."

"Good to hear, good to hear."

I waited until Hoffman left and I heard the elevator door close behind him before holding up my trembling cane. "It's locked onto the folder."

"And I was able to pair to his cell," Vega said, showing me her smartphone.

"All right, but keep that thing away from me. I don't want to mess it up."

Vega was preparing to say something when the phone rang. She raised a finger for silence and carried the phone to the far corner of the office before activating the speaker.

Someone picked up.

"Yeah?" a man's voice asked.

"I've got the file," Hoffman said through the crackling exchange.

"Good. You know where to drop it."

"I'll have it there in a few," Hoffman said.

Vega swore under her breath as she put the phone away.

I stood. "Sounds like the hunt is on."

VEGA DROVE while I aimed my cane out the window, calling out the turns. The streets were practically deserted, one of the reasons for the hunting spell. Hoffman would have spotted us had we tried to tail him.

The spell directed us into Little Italy and down Broome Street, confirming my suspicions.

"There he is," Vega said, easing off the gas. Blocks ahead, a blue sedan was turning left, brake lights glimmering red off the still-wet asphalt.

"He's already made the drop," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Because my cane's pulling us to that corner."

In fact, my cane was jerking like it had hooked a marlin. I choked up my grip to keep the spell from yanking the cane from my hands.

Vega pulled up to the corner and idled.

"The mailbox," I said, cane aimed at the squat blue receptacle bolted into the concrete.

"All right, we'll put eyes on it." She drove through the intersection and U-turned at the next one, parking in front of the rolled-down steel door of a butcher shop about a half block from the box.

She killed the lights and engine.

"The son of a bitch lied to my face," she said.

"Hoffman?"

"You were there. He looked me straight in the eyes and told me he had nothing to do with Moretti." She shook her head. "And I trusted him. When this is over, his ass is history."

"I know I don't consult on hirings and firings, but that sounds fine with me."

"Shh," Vega said, sliding down in her seat.

I did the same and peeked over the dashboard. Headlights were swimming into view from straight ahead. We slid even lower as the car behind the lights took shape—a classic sports car. At the corner with the mailbox, the car cut right and droned out of sight. I glanced over at Vega as I scooted back up.

"False alarm?"

“Stay down,” she said. “The driver’s probably circling to make sure he’s not being tailed.”

She was right. The same headlights reappeared a minute later. This time, the car pulled up to the corner. A man in a hat and coat got out of the passenger’s seat, looked around, and hunkered on the far side of the mailbox. Seconds later, he stood and returned to the car, a familiar-looking folder in hand.

“Recognize him?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s one of Moretti’s men. How’s your spell holding up?”

“Should be good for another thirty.” I watched the car turn left onto Bowery.

“Moretti’s place isn’t far from here, but they’ll probably tool around the neighborhood for a little to make sure no one’s following.”

We gave them a few minutes’ head start before Vega pulled from the curb.

My cane tugged us north onto Bowery. Following a couple of jags, we ended up on Second Avenue, skirting the worst of the East Village. Blocks away, ghouls rummaged through garbage piles. They were getting bolder, something that was going to become a problem for Mayor Lowder as eyewitness accounts increased and more New Yorkers went missing.

When the spires of Midtown rose around us, Vega asked, “Still north?”

I could hear the uncertainty in her voice. We were miles from Little Italy. “Until my spell says otherwise.”

Her smartphone rang, and she pulled it from her pocket. “Vega,” she said.

On the other end, I picked up what sounded like a woman’s urgent voice.

Vega squinted as she listened, as though trying to hear better. “Where are you?” she asked. The woman’s voice was interrupted by a shotgun blast before she resumed.

“Shit,” Vega spat, more to herself, it seemed. “All right. Hang on. We’re on our way.” She threw the phone onto the dash and performed a vicious U-turn, mashing me against the door. “That was your vampire-hunter friend Blade,” she said when we’d straightened.

“Blade? What’s going on?”

“They’ve got the creature pinned in a basement at Frederick Douglass Apartments, a project just north of Ferguson Towers.”

I glanced back in the direction we had been heading. “But … the file.” I had very nearly said *your son*.

“The hunters can’t stop the creature. She’s out of control. And right now Blade and her friends are the only thing standing between her and the thousand-odd residents of Frederick Douglass. They need

backup."

"How did they even know where to find her?"

"They picked up some chatter on their police scanner. Someone called in a murder in progress. Another junkie."

"That's what Alexandra came to the city for," I decided. "Heroin."

"What?"

"Well, blood and heroin. She's targeting junkies, not because they're low-hanging fruit, but because she's feeding an addiction. Remember the victims at Ferguson Towers? The way the blood had been lapped up? I'm betting it was because the blood had been freshly injected."

"Great," Vega said. "So we've got a werewolf-vampire hybrid who also happens to be a raging addict."

I dumped the iron ammo from my revolver onto my lap and began pushing silver bullets into the cylinders. As I worked, I noticed that Alexandra's photo had slipped from the file on the dashboard such that the young woman seemed to be looking at me. I considered what Dr. Z had said about killing a hybrid: *Decapitation, baby*.

God, I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

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We pulled up in front of a single grim housing tower. Before Vega could get out, I seized her arm.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"I want you to go back to Lady Bastet's."

"What? Why?"

"To see if she can perform another binding spell."

"Croft, the creature's killed four people that we know of, and—"

"And inside that creature is a young woman who didn't ask to become what she is," I said. "That's why there's a mother out there doing everything she can to protect her. That's why Arnaud forbade us from hunting her. The mother was afraid we would kill her."

Vega looked from me to the tower and sighed.

"I'll keep her from the residents," I said. "Wizard's honor."

"All right, but I'll hold you to that."

I got out and slammed the door closed before Vega could change her mind. As she took off west, I ran toward the tower. The front door was unlocked, the blacked-out lobby empty. I called light to my cane and found a door that opened onto a plummeting staircase. I swore as my chest began to tighten.

Why do these big showdowns always have to happen underground?

Shouts and violent clangs rose as I descended. At the bottom I made out Blade and Bullet, their headlamps slicing through the darkness. Nearby, a thick pipe braced a metal door that shook with blows and screams.

"Don't shoot," I said as Bullet swung his shotgun toward me. "It's Everson."

Bullet nodded quickly, eyes huge, and returned his aim to the door.

When I was almost to them, my light glowed over Dr. Z. He was propped against a wall behind them, the chest of his leather outfit ripped open. In his right hand, he gripped the handle of a broken ninja sword.

"What in the hell happened?" I shouted above the noise.

"What's it look like?" Blade said, her mouth bloody, samurai sword gripped in both hands. "We got our asses handed to us."

I knelt beside Dr. Z, who stared straight ahead, his breaths shocked and gasping. I moved his hand from his chest and winced at the damage. The creature had clawed him to the bone.

Hovering my cane's orb over his chest, I spoke Words of healing. A soothing force moved through me, emerging as a cottony aura that enveloped Dr. Z. His eyelids fluttered closed, arms relaxing to his sides. Caroline had not only restored my power, it seemed, but my control. I hoped both would be enough to handle the creature until Lady Bastet arrived.

I stood from Dr. Z's side and turned to the clanging door. "Is that her?"

"Yeah," Bullet said, "and the door's not gonna hold her much longer."

"No?" It still looked solid to me, especially with the pipe bracing it.

"Check out the hinges," Blade said.

The hinges were as thick as toilet-paper tubes, but old. With each blow, rust sifted from them. Beyond the door, nails screamed over metal, sending a sharp shudder through me.

"We had her cornered in there," Blade said. "Bullet tossed a frag grenade into the drain she'd come up through, collapsing her escape. The creature was injured, too. Then a band of frigging blood slaves jumped us, giving the creature time to recover. She tore into Dr. Z good. We were lucky to get her off him and get ourselves the hell out of there. The only reason we haven't ditched the job is because I don't like the idea of that thing above ground."

"Yeah, that makes a few of us," I said, drawing my revolver. "Look, I've got someone on the way. Someone who may be able to transform the creature back to the human she was."

"That thing's human?" Bullet said, squinting from me to the shaking door.

"An eighteen-year-old girl," I said. "If we can keep her in there for another twenty minutes or so, we might not have to fight her."

"No argument here," Blade said.

With the next collision against the door, something snapped in the lower set of hinges. The pipe bent at its middle and shifted. *Crap.* The door wasn't going to contain her for twenty more minutes. More like two.

"Back up," I said as the door shook with another blow.

Blade eased toward the rear wall, adjusting her grip on her sword. Bullet backed up beside her, shotgun aimed at the door from his stomach. Neither of them knew I was a magic user, but they weren't exactly strangers to the supernatural. I would explain later.

Aiming my cane at the door, I murmured, *"Vigore."*

A low-level force shook from the sword and met the door as the creature collided into it again. My casting prism buckled. The bracing pipe folded at its middle and clanged to the cement floor.

"Vigore," I repeated, leaning into the increasing force flowing from my cane.

The creature's next collision broke the lower hinge and cracked the upper one. I staggered but kept my footing. The door tilted in the cement frame, creating a narrow space along the top edge. Bloody talons jabbed through the space, the creature's scream cutting deep into my ears.

"Someone get Dr. Z out of here," I shouted.

Blade cocked her head of pink-spiked hair at Bullet. "You're almost out of ammo."

"Yeah, but you gonna be okay?" he asked.

"I've got a professor-cop-wizard in my corner," she said with a smirk. "Who knew?"

Bullet holstered his shotgun on his back and scooped up Dr. Z like he weighed nothing.

The talons disappeared from above the door.

At the foot of the steps, Bullet leaned toward me and said, "Blade can get a little bold for her own good. Keep an eye on her."

I nodded quickly and braced for the next impact. The creature hit the door like a truck, destroying the upper hinge and dropping me to my knees. The door threatened to collapse. With a shouted Word I slammed it back into its frame, muscles burning, body streaming sweat.

The door rattled and shook. I had expended too much power in too little time and could feel my hold failing, could feel Thelonious whispering around my thoughts. "She's coming through," I grunted.

"Let her," Blade said from her crouch.

"Huh?"

Blade licked her pierced lips. "Just partway. If you can pin that thing in the doorway, I can make her think twice about wanting to come out the rest of the way."

The door stopped rattling. Beyond, I heard talons scratching over cement, gaining speed.

I braced as the creature collided into the door, overwhelming my counterforce. The weathered rectangle of metal crashed to the floor, and the creature filled the doorway, larger than she had appeared in the storm drain. A fang-filled jaw jutted through hanks of dark hair, her muscled body bloodied from her assault on the door. Her red gaze cut from me to Blade, a deep growl growing in her chest.

The space rang with explosions as I aimed my revolver and squeezed off two shots. Black blood burst from the creature's chest,

and she recoiled.

I took aim at her heart—to stun her, if nothing else—but Blade darted into my line of fire. Silver sword flashing, she slashed the creature back into the basement room. Aluminum cans and debris scattered around their feet. The creature screamed and threw her arms up to block the slicing blows.

I followed, glowing cane held aloft. But as hard and fast as Blade struck, the creature's tissue was regenerating too quickly. And the creature was no longer backing up.

"Blade!" I called. "Get behind me!"

With an angry scream, the creature swiped a clawed hand at Blade's face. Her sword flashed into a parry, catching the creature's wrist. Though the talons didn't rend flesh, the force knocked Blade to the floor. The creature pounced, her jaw of nail-sharp teeth diving for Blade's throat.

"Forza dura!" I cried, aiming my cane.

The explosive force blew the creature into a graffiti-smeared wall. Blade's sword went along for the ride, clattering beside her. The creature recovered and watched us from a snarling crouch.

"Alexandra, listen to me." I pushed power into my entrancing wizard's voice, remembering how I had been able to reach Father Vick when the demon possessed him last fall. "You're a bright young woman in her final year of high school, not the monster that's taken you over. If there's the smallest part of you that can hear me, stand your ground. Don't allow these impulses to drive you. They are not you, Alexandra. Do you hear me? They are *not*—"

The creature's muscles bunched up and she sprang at me, not a spark of humanity in those glowing red eyes.

I backed from her bounds and fired twice, missing high. My heel caught what felt like a stuffed sack. I lost my balance backwards. The cane tumbled out of my grasp as I slammed into the floor. When the creature was almost on me, she buckled off course, skidding over the trash-strewn floor.

She righted herself and rounded on Blade, who had rammed into her side. A pair of spear-head-sized blades flashed in the punk rocker's hands.

"Come and get some," Blade said.

She ducked and spun beneath the creature's leap, finger blades flashing up. The creature screamed as she passed overhead, blood spraying from her stomach. Staggering to a stop, the creature turned around. Blade, whose face was stippled red, grinned back at her.

She's dancing with death, I thought.

As I pawed behind me for my cane, I saw that I had tripped over a blood slave, their bodies littering the room in shapeless mounds.

Against a far wall lay the creature's latest victim, his neck obliterated.

The hybrid charged again. Blade ducked, but the creature didn't leap this time. At the same moment I grasped my cane, her lowered head cracked into Blade's, the sound resounding throughout the cement space. Blade was out before she even flopped onto her back, finger blades spilling from her grasp.

"Protezione!" I shouted, bringing the cane overhead and aiming between Blade and the creature. A light shield glimmered into being, the creature's jaw smashing into it in a spray of sparks.

"Respingere!" I cried.

A force pulsed from the shield, shoving Blade toward the doorway and the creature deeper into the basement room. But I had sacrificed too much energy. The shield faded out. I pushed myself to my feet and stumbled forward until I was standing between Blade and the creature.

Straining to see through wisps of Thelonious's creamy white light, I aimed the revolver at the creature's head.

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Panting, blood and adrenaline souring my mouth, I stared at the creature across the room. The creature glared back, torn and blood spattered but healing. I wasn't going to be able to stop her. Not with three bullets. Not with my powers running near empty and no useful spell items to speak of. Maybe not even with my powers running at full.

The vampire and werewolf parts of Alexandra seemed to be having a boosting effect on one other. Strength, brutality, the uncanny ability to heal… *Damn near invincible is right,* I thought, remembering what Dr. Z had told me back at their apartment.

I holstered my revolver in the front of my pants and drew my cane into sword and staff. My best chance was to keep her off balance with low-level blasts while attempting to sever her head at the neck. The hybrid's death would also mean the death of the young woman inside her, but I probably wasn't going to be alive long enough to weigh the morality of that decision.

I cleared the aluminum cans from around my feet and widened my stance.

The creature crouched back on her hands and haunches, nostrils flaring. Distracted, she broke eye contact to sniff something near her hand—a cast-off drug envelope. When she raised her eyes again, I could feel the violent hunger radiating from them, could see it in her drooling mouth.

She needed her fix.

I chanced a glance around the room. My gaze hit on more drug envelopes, cans, empty snack bags. A flicker of hope took hold inside me. I didn't have my spell items, no, but maybe I didn't need them. *A few small investments of energy, a few lucky breaks…*

I sheathed my sword and stooped slowly to retrieve one of the drug envelopes. I ran a finger around the inside of the brown package, my skin picking up a faint coating of dust. The creature sprang.

"Fuoco!" I shouted, blowing on my coated finger.

The spell that I used on dragon sand to create fire was an amplifier. Now, a burst of energy entered each tiny granule sailing off my finger, intensifying its chemistry a hundredfold. I held my breath

and scrambled back from the pluming white cloud as the creature plunged into it.

She emerged on the other side in a stagger, eyelids sagging, jaw hanging to the side. She blinked around languidly, but the muscles of her face were already beginning to tighten. I didn't have much time.

I jabbed my cane around the room, calling everything conductive. Cans, metallic snack bags, scattered change. They tumbled and skittered inward. With another incantation, I arranged the items into a casting circle around the creature, pushing as much energy into it as I dared.

The creature stared at the garbage glowing into formation around her feet, an angry roar building in her chest. Her muscles bunched up to spring.

"Serrare," I called.

The circle snapped closed. The creature rebounded from a manifested wall of energy. A wall the casting symbol was now sustaining. Exhausted, swimmy-headed, I tamped down my power and leaned back against a wall. I'd gone to the very brink. One more invocation and Thelonious would come sweeping in to pay the ladies of Frederick Douglass Housing a visit.

The debris comprising the circle rattled as the creature took up her attack against the field. As with the door, the field wouldn't be able to contain her for long, but I was shooting for long enough.

With the creature's next strike, the aluminum cans shuddered and the field wavered.

"Cease," a voice commanded, its power propagating through the room.

The creature halted her assault and stared past me. I turned to find Lady Bastet stepping through the ruined doorway, Vega close behind, her pistol drawn. I laughed in weary relief.

"All hail the cavalry," I said.

In one of Lady Bastet's hands, a clutch of what appeared to be dried wolf's bane plumed smoke. In her other, she carried a bejeweled flail, with which she beat the air in rhythmic strokes.

"I bound you once," she said in ancient Egyptian, striding forward. *"I tied your lupine and vampiric natures together. Fastened them with intricate knots. As each struggled to free itself, they only pulled the knots tighter, allowing the child to live a life unencumbered. But a foreign substance broke those knots, undid what had been done, and your lupine and vampiric natures fed. By the grace of Mut, I will bind them again. I will free the girl inside."*

A snarl curling her bloody lips, the creature watched Lady Bastet circle the field.

Vega came up beside me. "Are you all right?"

“Yeah, just weak.” I pulsed energy into the symbol to help sustain the casting circle. I nodded toward Blade, who was struggling to sit up, a hand to her head. “Would you mind checking on her?”

Vega nodded and went over to Blade.

“Sleep … slumber … dream,” Lady Bastet chanted.

I eyed the creature, who didn’t appear on the verge of any of those. But the smoke from the wolf’s bane had begun to change, the strokes of the flail shaping it into small hawk-like spirits. They sprang from the air and into the casting circle. The creature screamed and swiped at them, but they evaded her hands. One by one, they thinned and slipped into her nose and mouth. In weakening fits of coughing, the creature sagged to the floor.

“Release the circle,” Lady Bastet said.

I looked from the slumbering creature to her and back. “Are you sure?”

“Release it,” she insisted.

I did as she said, withdrawing energy until the field collapsed. Lady Bastet caught the creature’s head and, kneeling, cushioned it with her thighs. She brushed the dank hair from the creature’s temples, then pressed her palms to them, incanting in whispers, her head bowed.

I walked over to where Vega had helped Blade to a wall, against which the vampire hunter now sat. An angry gash cut across Blade’s brow, and her eyes looked bleary. “So who are you guys?” she asked. “Magic Inc?”

“Something like that,” I said. “Here.”

I applied enough healing energy to Blade to stabilize her. Then we all watched Lady Bastet work. A turquoise aura enveloped the creature, who lay supine, legs straight, arms across her chest, as though the energy were swaddling her. Muscles trembled and jumped and she bared her teeth, but her eyes remained closed. I sensed the battle raging inside her, the vampire and werewolf parts of her makeup resisting Lady Bastet’s magic.

But Lady Bastet worked meticulously, moving from one binding to the next. What bindings the creature pulled free, Lady Bastet refastened. And I recognized the pattern of the bindings as one large plaited knot. I had a flash of an Egyptian goddess on the banks of the Nile, weaving strips of palm leaves. Now, when the creature parts of Alexandra strained, the fibers pulled taut, securing the larger knot.

At last, Lady Bastet sat back with a sigh.

“It is done,” she said.

The aura dimmed, and the creature it had once held was a young woman. Her dark auburn hair was distressed, her body bruised and bleeding, but she was the girl in the photo. Alexandra Mills. Shedding

my coat, I stepped forward and placed it over her. I then lifted her limp body into my arms.

"Looks like she needs a hospital," I said.

"No, the binding is too fresh," Lady Bastet said. "Western medicines may undo it. I can care for her at my place."

We left the basement, Vega helping Blade up the stairs and out to the street. When we reached the sedan, I set Alexandra in the back seat, and Lady Bastet got in on the other side.

"This is where I split," Blade said.

"Can we drop you off somewhere?" I asked.

"No need." She nodded toward an old blue paint truck rumbling toward us. As the truck neared the curb, Bullet leaned across the passenger seat and opened the door. Blade sheathed her samurai sword into a scabbard on her back. "A pleasure working with you," she said as she climbed into the truck. "Even if it cost us thirty grand."

"*Now* will you tell us who hired you?" I asked.

"Nope." She waved from the window. "Don't be a stranger."

"I won't," I said. "Take care."

It certainly didn't hurt to know a few vampire hunters in the city.

When I dropped into the passenger seat, Vega was staring at her smartphone, the glow paling her tense face.

"What is it?" I asked.

She turned the image for me to see. I squinted a moment before I understood what I was looking at. It was a close-up shot of her son's neck. A small blue vein had been pricked, as though by a pin, and a thread of blood leaked from the vessel.

Beneath the picture, someone had typed, "Better hurry. The scent alone is *intoxicating*."

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We dropped Lady Bastet and Alexandra off at the rug store. While Vega waited stiffly in the car, I carried Alexandra inside, setting her on a cot Lady Bastet had unfolded in the back room. “Tell no one she is here,” Lady Bastet warned me as I left.

Back in the car, I focused on my cane, tapping into what remained of the hunting spell. My cane vibrated and then jerked in my hands. *Good. Still connected to the file.* But probably not for much longer. I powered down the window and aimed the cane outside. The spell tugged northwest.

“That way,” I said.

Vega peeled from the curb. At my directions, we ended up on Second Avenue near where we had aborted our earlier pursuit of Moretti’s men.

“Hold this course,” I said.

“I need you to be damn sure about this.”

“I am,” I said, but I understood what she meant. With her son imperiled, every second mattered. And in the time it had taken for us to deal with Alexandra, Moretti’s men should have circled back. The spell should have been pulling us south, toward Little Italy. Not north.

When we reached the East Seventies, Vega blew out her breath. “This isn’t right. What in the hell would Moretti’s men be doing way up here? We’re getting into the Russians’ territory. I’m going to ask you again. Are you sure you’re—”

“Turn right!” I cried, clutching the bucking cane in both hands.

Vega slammed the brakes and cranked the wheel. The sedan skidded over the slick road, grazing a parked car, then leapt forward again, blowing through the next intersection. Three blocks later, with the night sky beginning to pale over the East River ahead, the cane steered us left onto an affluent street. A tree-filled park rose outside my window.

“Slow down,” I said. The cane was rotating toward an opening in the tall security gate ahead. “There,” I said, nodding at a driveway and what appeared to be a guard house beyond.

“I don’t believe it.” Vega slowed to a stop and cut her lights.

“What?”

"You don't know where we are?"

I looked around, trying to get my bearings. It was a corner of the city I rarely visited. The closest intersection was with East Eighty-seventh Street, which was telling me something.

"Wait a minute. Is this…"

Vega nodded, her eyes hard. "The mayor's mansion."

"Budge is involved in this?"

"Apparently."

"I don't get it. He's working for Moretti?"

Vega narrowed her eyes at the guard house. "More likely Moretti's men are working for him."

I clenched my brow, trying to make sense of the development. Now the shock of revelation opened everything wide. Alexandra was the stepdaughter of someone powerful, but not Mr. Moretti.

"Budge is the stepfather," I said numbly.

"Meaning his wife's the mother."

I thought of the soft-spoken woman at the gala. "Penny is Chastity Summers?"

"That's what Arnaud meant by the truth not being far from me," Vega said. "Little Italy is close, but City Hall is a hell of a lot closer. Practically across the street from police headquarters."

Vega pulled out her smartphone and began tapping the screen.

"Who are you calling?"

"I'm replying to Arnaud, telling him we know who the mother is."

Moments later, her phone blipped with a response. Vega sighed harshly through her nose.

"What?"

"He wrote back, 'Is that your final answer? Tick-tock, tick-tock.'"

Vega veered into the driveway.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Making sure," she said.

"Shouldn't we, you know, strategize?"

"There's no time."

She pulled up to the guard house, stopping in front of the mechanical gate barring our way. The man inside the booth, though big and bulky, didn't look as mercenary as the guards for the Financial District. Then again, he was a public employee.

"Detective Vega with the NYPD," Vega said, holding up her ID. "I need to see Mayor Lowder immediately."

The guard consulted a console, the screen glowing green against his face. "Is he expecting you?"

"No, an emergency came up."

"Those usually come from the police commissioner. But I can ask him." He picked up a phone and punched a button. "Good morning,

Mayor. There's a Detective Vega here to see you regarding an emergency."

"Tell him it concerns his family," Vega said.

"It has to do with your family." The guard scratched his chin. "All right, sir. Thank you."

When the guard stooped down, I called power to my prism, ready to cast. But instead of a weapon, he reappeared with a clipboard, which he asked Vega to sign. Vega passed the clipboard back. The gate blocking our way rose while a row of bollards beyond sank into the driveway.

"That seemed too easy," Vega muttered as she crawled the sedan forward.

I uttered an invocation, and a shield glimmered thinly around the car as the mayor's mansion rounded into view. The city used to give weekly tours of the mansion before the Crash, but I had never been back here. The yellow two-story house looked plantation style, with its wide front porch, second-story balcony, and line of stately columns. A handful of cars sat in spaces out front, including the sports car Moretti's men had been driving.

Vega parked beside it.

"What's our plan?" I asked.

"Let me do the talking." Vega drew her sidearm and got out. I climbed from the passenger side and strained to reshape the shield so that it protected the two of us. My powers had recharged on the drive up, but remained short of full strength. "Notice anything strange?" she asked.

"No guards?"

"Bingo."

Shots cracked from the sides of the house, sparking off the shield.

"Vigore!" I shouted, directing the force into a cluster of bushes to the left of the porch. In a burst of leaves, one of Moretti's men somersaulted skyward. Vega aimed and shot twice. Both bullets found their target, silencing the man before he crashed to the ground. The man on the right side of the house stood to run. Vega shot him once in the back. He face-planted on the lawn and went still.

I caught up to Vega on the front porch, where she seized the door handle. She stood back and nodded at my cane. With another *"Vigore!"* the door blew inward. Vega entered low, swinging her firearm from side to side. I moved in behind her, the final tugs of the hunting spell indicating we had the right address.

"Mayor Lowder," she called.

"In here," a man's voice answered from the next room.

We followed the voice to a large antique-furnished sitting room. To one side of a crackling fireplace, Budge was reclined in a leather chair,

a brown bathrobe fastened loosely around his belly, his slippered feet propped on an ottoman. He peered at us over a pair of reading glasses, a newspaper spread over his lap.

"Detective," he said, cordially. "And is that Everson Croft from the gala? Have a seat, have a seat."

While he gestured to the other chairs in the room, Vega swept the space with her pistol before taking a position where she could watch both doors and the staircase. "I'll stand, thank you," she said.

Mayor Budge folded up the newspaper and dropped it on an end table. He swapped his reading glasses for his round pair and finger-combed the cowlick from his brow as he put them on. "Now, what's this about a family emergency?"

Vega leveled her gun at him. "I'm going to be asking the questions."

"Whoa there!" Budge showed his hands, his magnified eyes darting between us. "What do you think you're doing? Hey, you're a professor," he said to me. "Talk some sense into her."

"I think she's about to make plenty of sense," I said. "So why don't you just settle in?"

Budge gave me a look that said, *Has the whole city gone crazy?*

"Why don't we start with Mr. Moretti?" Vega said.

"Mr. Moretti? What about him?"

"When did you start contracting him to do jobs for you?"

"The man's calling my office all the time, trying to get me to do him favors. You think I'd work with him?"

"Got a couple of his men in your yard who would probably say yes," Vega said. "If I hadn't shot them dead."

"Moretti's men?" Budge swept the hair from his brow again and leaned forward to peer out the window. When he looked back at Vega, his brow bent in confusion. He appeared at an honest loss, but then I remembered the gala and how quickly he could change his demeanor.

"Why don't we start from the beginning," Vega said. "When did you find out your wife had a daughter?"

Budge blinked his eyes. "Since before we were married."

"Yeah, right," Vega said. "When did you find out *what* she was?"

"Hey, what's this about?" Budge asked. "How do you two know so much?"

Vega glanced over at me—not the reaction she was expecting either—before pressing on. "At what point did you decide you wanted her dead? When she left school? When you found out she'd changed?"

"Wanted her dead?" Budge looked from Vega to me in horror. "What is she talking about?"

"Look," I said. "We know you hired vampire hunters to kill her. We also know you've been trying to eliminate anyone and anything that

connects your wife—and you—to the creature. And that's meant contracting out work to Moretti. Makes sense. Someone running for reelection in a close race would do anything to keep a homicidal creature from being attached to his name. Can you imagine what your opponent would do with that?"

"What is this?" he asked, his neck turning red. "Some sort of blackmail job? You trying to set me up for something?"

Vega ignored the act. "Just so you know, I've given all the information we've uncovered to a third party. If anything happens to us, that information goes public. The hit on Sonny, the attempted hits on *us*, your dealings with Mr. Moretti. Even if you never see the inside of a courtroom, you're going to be slammed in the court of public opinion. You'll be done." Vega was lying about sharing the info with a third party, but damn, she was selling it well.

"If you have anything you'd like to amend," I said to the mayor. "We're all ears."

Budge looked around the room before sighing and running his hands through his hair. "All right." When he stood, Vega adjusted her aim, but he only lumbered to the fireplace. He leaned a forearm against the mantel so that he was staring into the flames. "Penny and I met at a dinner party back when I was a city commissioner. Boy, was she something. Turned every last head in the place, but for some reason she had eyes for me." Budge snorted a laugh. "So we started dating. Before we got too serious, though, I had her checked out, you know?"

"By an investigator?" Vega asked.

"And a diviner," Budge said. "An old man who lives in Chinatown. Mayor Alito swore by him." He turned toward me. "Leaders don't just use oracles in the myths, Professor. Anyway, I found out about her past at the Forty-second Street clubs. And also about her child."

"I bet that upset you," Vega said.

"Yeah, but not for the reason you might think. I came up in foster care, you see? Rough place for a kid. I couldn't stand the thought of her kid in the same system, so I made sure Alexandra was put in a good school."

"Wait." I shook my head. "*You* were Mr. Smith, her sponsor?"

He looked over at me. "Found out about that too, huh? Thought it was the least I could do."

"Did your wife know?" Vega asked.

Budge waved a hand. "Naw, she never talked about her, so I didn't either. I put Alexandra through twelve years of school and had her all set up for college without Penny ever knowing. But then I hear Alexandra's left the boarding school, and the diviner tells me that she's … she's turned into some kind of monster, that she's killing

people."

"And he advised you to destroy her," I said, trying to preserve the parts of Vega and my theory that still made sense. "To cover up any evidence that might connect Alexandra to your wife or to you."

"That's where you keep losing me," Budge said. "I didn't hire anyone to do anything like that."

"But you hired someone to do something else," I said, the truth rearranging itself and slotting into place. Vega and I had had the right theory, had found the right couple, but we'd reversed their roles. "You hired Arnaud to protect her."

A nervous tongue darted across Budge's lips. He dropped his head and nodded. "Hired him to capture her, actually. Takes a vampire to catch a vampire, you know? I wanted to get her some help."

"And you made him promise not to tell anyone," I said.

"Wait a sec." Budge's hands balled into hairy fists. "Was he the one who told you all of this?"

"No, in fact," I said, which was the truth—and no doubt at least part of the point of Arnaud's game. But what could Budge have possibly offered Arnaud in payment? The vampire was already a billionaire.

"Hold on a sec," Vega said, realization now creeping over her face. "If you hired Arnaud to protect your daughter, then—"

"His wife must be the big, bad wolf," someone finished.

I looked up, and there she was: the half-werewolf who wanted her daughter dead. Who wanted *us* dead. Penny Lowder strode down the staircase in a blue business skirt and jacket, her dyed-blond hair, usually fastened up, falling almost to her waist, loose and luxurious. Surgery no doubt masked her likeness to the young woman she'd once been. But with her veneer of submissiveness shed, I could feel her true nature, could see it radiating from her lupine eyes.

Vega trained her pistol on Penny, but the mayor's wife wasn't alone. Security guards flanked her, while others filled the two doorways to the sitting room. I sensed werewolf in them, too. With a Word, I reinforced the shield around Detective Vega and me, wondering how long I could hold it.

"Why don't you go upstairs, honey," Penny said to Budge. "We'll discuss your naughtiness later."

Budge nodded quickly, eyes large with fear, and hustled up the stairs and out of sight. I returned my attention to Penny, the power behind the mayoral throne. She stopped at a central landing.

"Now," she said in a growling voice. "What to do with these two?"

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"You're the one who hired the vampire hunters and Moretti's men," I said, still not quite believing it. "You had Sonny killed. You put the hits on Vega and me and probably anyone else with information that would connect you to your daughter."

"I'm not going to confirm or deny anything," Penny said as the guards filed around her and down the steps. "But aren't we all after the same thing? Getting a killer off the streets? Keeping the citizens of New York safe?"

"Making sure your husband is reelected?" Vega said. "Keeping your hold on power?"

"What you think you know about my motives or past is inconsequential. Especially under the present circumstances." She glanced at the guards.

"If anything happens to us—" Vega started to say.

"Ah, the threat." Penny grinned. "I heard everything you told my husband. The difference between my husband and me is that I can smell a lie." Her narrow nostrils flared out. "And you're giving off the sour odor, Detective. A good thing, because I *do* need you taken care of."

I cinched my grip on my cane as I counted the guards. At least twelve that I could see.

"Kill the intruders," Penny ordered.

The guards' snarling faces elongated, sprouting teeth and hair. Arms thickened and burst from uniform sleeves.

I created a firing line in Vega's shield as she squeezed off her first shots. A lunging werewolf seized his chest and fell forward, already reverting to his human form. Others swarmed over him, ears pinned back, jaws snapping against my shield. I had a cold flashback to Romania.

You possess magic now that you didn't then, I reminded myself.

Even so, what magic I possessed would only keep them off us for so long.

I drew my revolver and patted where my outer coat pockets would have been before realizing I had left my coat on Alexandra. No coat meant no more ammo. I released the revolver's cylinder and looked.

Three bullets.

A force jarred me, and the revolver fell from my hands. The werewolves were coordinating their attack, pulling back and then slamming into the shield at the same time, their supernatural strength rattling our protection all the way to my mental prism. And with the beasts coming in low, Vega's shots were tearing into shoulders and heads more so than chests.

"Respingere!" I cried.

The shield pulsed, shoving the werewolves back, allowing me time to stoop and retrieve the revolver. But the chamber only held one bullet now. I found one of the dislodged bullets beside my shoe but couldn't see where the other one had clattered off to. *Dammit.* I pushed the silver bullet into the next slot and, with a wrist flick, snapped the chamber closed. Though Vega had dropped a couple more werewolves, the rest quickly reassembled.

"How you doing for ammo?" I shouted.

"Just reloaded," Vega replied, squinting down her gun's sights.

The werewolves rammed into the shield again, causing it to flicker.

"I'll set them up, you knock them down," I said through gritted teeth. "Like we did outside."

Vega nodded quickly.

"Vigore!" I cried, willing a force from the ground into one of the retreating werewolves. The force caught him under the chin, knocking him up and back, exposing his chest. Vega didn't miss. The shot blew through the werewolf's sternum, and we were down to eight.

The remaining werewolves let out savage barks, their eyes blazing yellow, bared fangs running with saliva. The deaths of their pack members seemed only to be making them more mindless, which was to our advantage.

With their next charge, I shouted another Word. The uppercut-like force bared another werewolf's chest, and Vega finished the job.

We're winning, I thought as the shield stood up to the collision of the remaining wolves. *We're going to get out of this.*

Shouting Word after Word, I flung the werewolves up, and Vega shot them dead. When the final werewolf fell and became human, I looked around for Penny. She was no longer on the staircase. I was opening my mouth to ask Vega if she'd seen where the mayor's wife had gone when the window behind us shattered. I wheeled as a massive stone planter ricocheted off the shield.

A pair of wolves were outside, the larger one's arms bulging around a large-diameter hose nozzle. Water blasted through the window, spattering my shield and flooding the room. The magic I wielded fizzled and sparked. Vega leveled her firearm at the werewolves and squeezed, but no explosion followed.

"I'm out," she shouted.

"So are we," I said, taking her arm. The running water was drowning my magic, and we were down to two bullets. I pulled her into the foyer as my shield dispersed with a soggy pop. Through the blown-open front door, I could see the werewolves coming around to head us off.

"The window," Vega said, pulling me back into the sitting room.

We splashed toward the shattered window. Taking the end of a waterlogged rug, I heaved the thick fabric over the window's jagged lower frame and then lifted Vega so she was sitting on it. She wasted no time swinging her legs around and dropping the three feet into a flower bed.

I was preparing to follow when I heard snarling behind me.

The two werewolves had entered the sitting room and were running toward me. I drew my revolver and squeezed twice. The point-blank shots nailed their chests, dropping them to the parquet floor.

Nice shooting, Tex, I thought, looking down at their melding bodies. *But you're out of ammo now.*

Meaning it was *really* time to get going. We had identified Alexandra's mother as the First Lady of New York City. More than that, we had discovered that she was the one trying to kill her daughter. Somewhere in there was the information Arnaud had wanted us to find.

"Oh, and you were so, so close," Penny said.

I turned to find her sauntering in from the foyer, dragging Detective Vega by her hair. The blood fell from my face. I jerked my leg back inside and shot to my feet, revolver raised.

"Drop her," I said, cocking the hammer on the empty weapon.

Penny jerked Vega up and around, clutching her in front of her, a human shield. "I will when you toss your weapon. Go on. Out the window."

I didn't move.

Penny dug her nails into the skin on either side of Vega's trachea. "Would you rather I tear out her throat?"

I sighed and did as she said, the revolver thumping onto the grass.

Penny deposited Vega in the same chair where the mayor had been reading. Beneath the light of the standing lamp, I caught a knot of bruising beneath Vega's right eye.

"Let her go," I said. "She has nothing to do with this."

Penny chuckled as she sat on the armrest, her fingers still clamping Vega's throat. "Such chivalry, Everson. But she has plenty to do with this. Now have a seat." She nodded toward a hard couch that had tipped over during the melee. "I'm going to ask you some questions. If

you don't want to watch your partner die horribly, you're going to answer them."

"Okay, okay," I said, quickly righting the couch and lowering myself to the edge.

"And keep your feet in the water."

I looked down to where shallow waves lapped against the soles of my shoes. Water was a poor conductor of magic, and she knew it.

"Question number one," Penny said. "How did you learn that Alexandra was my daughter?"

"Good detective work," I replied.

Penny's nails dug deeper into the skin around Vega's throat. "Try again."

"Your old boss told us. Sonny."

"One more lie and she dies."

I glanced around for anything I could use as a weapon. No matter how I answered, her plan was to ultimately kill us both. My gaze fell to the bodies of the fallen werewolves. If only I hadn't expended all my damn silver.

"How did you learn Alexandra was my daughter?" she repeated.

"Why do you care?" I said. "Afraid that if you don't tie up all the loose ends you won't be able to pull your husband's strings anymore?"

Her eyes narrowed in a way that told me I was skating on paper-thin ice. But I needed time to come up with something. Penny probably only had one or two questions. The minute I handed her the answers, Vega and I were history. At the very least I needed to spare Vega that fate.

"You must not care for your partner very much," Penny said.

"Fine, I'll tell you." I blew out my breath. "It was Arnaud Thorne."

"Arnaud?" Penny sniffed for a lie.

"That's right."

A look of worry or anger deepened the lines around her eyes. I stole a glance at the hearth. The jets of water had doused the fire, but a few embers continued to glow in the ashes below the grate. I could work with that. While Penny grappled with the revelation, I shifted back on the couch and lifted my feet just above the water.

"Why?" Penny demanded. "What does he want?"

I silently summoned energy to my casting prism before shrugging. "Maybe he just doesn't like you."

Penny's eyes blazed orange, and her fingers bit into Vega's throat.

"Fuoco!" I shouted.

Energy coursed through me in fits and starts, gained strength, and then opened out in the embers. A fireball roared from the hearth. Penny screamed as it swallowed her.

I stood and drew my cane, shouting another Word. The force

invocation sling-shot Vega from Penny's faltering grip toward my waiting arms. She was coming in too fast, though. The impact knocked the breath from my lungs and both of us to the floor. We landed with a hard splash.

Beyond my soaked legs, Penny was roaring and beating the flames that climbed her hair. Foul smoke filled the room. I forced myself to stand, pulling Vega up beside me. She coughed weakly.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

"I'll live," she said hoarsely.

Good, because I could feel Thelonious licking his chops, waiting for me to exhaust myself with another high-energy spell. With an arm wrapped around Vega's waist, she and I splashed from the sitting room. At the front door, I pushed her across the threshold but remained inside.

She staggered against the front-porch banister and squinted back at me. "Aren't you coming?"

"Find one of Arnaud's blood slaves," I said. "Tell him everything we've learned. That should get your son back." Before she could respond, I swung the door closed and sealed it with a locking spell.

Drawing the sword from my cane, I stalked back to the sitting room.

Time to finish this.

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I returned to find Penny thrashing in a puddle of water on the floor. Desperate to extinguish the last of the flames licking from her hair, she snapped and yipped, eyes rolling back into her head. Though only part-werewolf, she had inherited their fear of fire. I don't think she even saw me as I stood over her and raised my sword.

I remained clueless as to why Arnaud had set us on her trail. Didn't know what he stood to gain by us finding out what he already knew. But Vega and I were marked now because of it.

Unless I eliminated the threat at the source.

I tightened my grip on the sword handle. The blade was steel, not silver, which meant I would need to decapitate her. Not an act I was relishing.

I braced a foot against her stomach. Her head reared back, exposing her throat. The muscles in my shoulders and upper back bunched…

And a shot rang out.

Something kicked me in the right side of the chest. I dropped the sword and stumbled backwards, knocking over the couch. A pulsating numbness swallowed my right arm as I splashed seat down on the floor. I pressed my hand to where I'd been hit and felt warm blood.

"I couldn't let you do that."

I raised my face to where Budge stood on the stairs, a pistol in hand.

"She's done some bad things," he said. "But I depend on her. I need her."

"Her daughter," I managed. "We helped her earlier this evening. She's not a monster anymore."

"Alexandra's okay?" The gun drifted down to Budge's side. "She's safe?"

From the floor I nodded my head, a gray nausea washing over me.

"Thank God," he breathed. "Where is she?"

Penny moved in front of my view of Budge, her blackened scalp showing through what remained of her hair. Furious, orange eyes stared down on me. She spoke from a protruding jaw. "Yes, where is she?"

“That stopped being your business eighteen years ago,” I mumbled.

She straddled me and knifed a talon-like nail into my gunshot wound. White-hot pain seared through me. I bit back a scream and seized her wrist, but my strength was no match for hers. She gouged deeper until my hands fell away. I slapped the floor to keep from passing out.

“You’re sticking your nose into something you know nothing about,” Penny said. “And I know what you’re thinking. That your knowledge of Alexandra’s whereabouts is going to keep you alive, that you can use it as a bargaining chip to finesse your way out of this. But if Arnaud told you about Sonny, I’m betting he also told you about Lady Bastet.” Her lips spread into a crazy, canine smile. “Yes, that’s where you took her. I can smell the fear pouring off of you.”

“If she’s not a monster anymore,” Budge ventured from the staircase, “can’t we just leave her alone, honey?”

“Silence!” Penny shouted.

I whipped my head from side to side as she gouged my wound again. The room wavered.

“Call for reinforcements,” Penny told her husband. “I want one group to find and eliminate Detective Vega. The other will go to Lady Bastet’s in the West Village. I’ll join them when I finish with this one.”

Something glinted just beyond my left hand. The silver bullet I’d dropped earlier. I stretched and closed my fingers around it.

“I’m just not sure I like the idea of offing all these people,” Budge said.

“Well, *you* won’t be offing them, will you?”

As I imagined Budge nodding in reluctant assent, his marital advice from the gala floated around me: *It’s pretty simple, kids. Know when to agree, when to disagree, and when to agree to disagree.*

I chuckled through the haze of pain.

Penny’s eyes glared down at me, then fell further to the bullet I was aiming at her chest.

“Protezione,” I mumbled. In the wetness, magical energy hissed and snapped through my prism and down my arm. A small orb manifested around the base of the bullet. I tightened the orb, willing it smaller. I just needed the pressure to ignite a single grain of the powder charge.

Penny laughed at my grunting and seized my throat. “Oh, you pathetic man. Trying to fire a bullet without a—”

The explosion kicked the shell from my seared fingers and blew the bullet into Penny. I caught her as she collapsed forward. Twisting, I deposited her on the floor on her back. Her eyes stared at the ceiling while blood bubbled and smoked from the wound below her chest. I had hit a large vessel, but missed her heart.

I collapsed against the couch, exhausted, my own blood soaking

the arm of my jacket.

Budge hustled down the stairs and splashed into the sitting room. “Oh God,” he cried, staring down at his wife. “Oh, Penny.”

“She didn’t give me a choice,” I said.

His large eyes shifted to mine. They looked almost sad as he raised his gun.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said.

His silence seemed worse than any assertion he might have spoken. The gun’s bore stared at my face. My magic spent, I squinted away, hoping Vega and I had done enough to fulfill Arnaud’s terms.

“Stop!”

I rolled my head to find Vega standing in front of the broken window she’d climbed through, her pistol pointed at the mayor. Though Budge’s gun remained on me, his eyes wavered with uncertainty.

“A couple of ways we can play this,” Vega said. “One, you shoot Everson, then I shoot you. Two, you let Everson walk, and we make a deal that you never come after either of us.”

“Why would I do that?” the mayor asked.

“Because I just got off the phone with someone,” Vega said. “And I told this person everything that Everson and I know. Your wife was right; I was bluffing before. But not this time.” Her eyes were dead serious. “Rest assured, the information is safe with this person. But should anything happen to Everson, myself, or anyone close to us, they know what to do, who to contact. And I’m talking political opponents, media outlets, bloggers. You really will be finished.”

The mayor’s gaze moved between me and Vega, then fell to his bleeding wife. He lowered his gun.

“Go on,” he said softly. “Get out of here.”

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Vega powered down the bollards blocking our exit and climbed back into the sedan.

"Any word from Arnaud?" I asked as she pulled from the driveway of the mayor's mansion.

"Nothing. You all right?"

I grunted as I pulled my arm from my blood-soaked jacket. "I will be. How about you?"

The bruising under her right eye had spread to include shades of pink and deep blue. She turned onto East Eighty-sixth Street and scanned the brightening sidewalks. "Where the hell are they?"

I squinted around. "Sunlight won't kill a blood slave, but it does strip their powers. They tend to avoid it."

"I'm through with this shit." At Third Avenue, Vega took a hard left, snapped on her siren, and weaved through the growing traffic.

"Where are you going?"

"Where do you think?"

"The Financial District?"

"He has my son."

"We'll never get through the—"

"What would you have me do, Croft? We followed every one of his goddamned leads, and now he decides to go mute. Hasn't answered any of my texts or calls. I'm done playing his games."

I tented my fingers over my bullet wound and uttered a Word. With an agonizing tear, the bullet dislodged from bone and shot into my palm as though to a magnet.

"Christ," I hissed, dropping the bullet on the dashboard.

Vega glanced over. "Yeah, I know the feeling."

I touched my cane to my chest and incanted until healing energy cauterized the wound and anesthetized the shredded tissue. I sagged against the seat, the sweat that had sprung out over my body now soothing me.

"I can drop you off somewhere," Vega said.

I shook my head. "I'll go with you. But I need you to call Lady Bastet."

"Why?"

“Penny guessed where Alexandra was. She ordered her husband to send wolves down there. If I had killed Penny, I’d say Alexandra’s safe, but I missed her heart. She could still pull through.”

Vega drew out her phone and called.

“Yes?” Lady Bastet said over the speaker.

“It’s Everson and Detective Vega,” I shouted toward the phone while keeping myself a safe distance from the device. “Look, there’s a good chance some werewolves are on their way to your store. You need to get yourself and Alexandra out of there and someplace safe.”

“Do not worry, Everson. Alexandra is already someplace safe.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I foresaw the danger,” she said. *“I also divined who was in the best position to protect her. She’s in their care now.”*

“Who?” Vega asked.

“The fewer who know, the better. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I nodded at her logic. If and when Penny recovered, she would order a full-scale search for her daughter. She would squeeze the location out of whomever she could. “Well, what about you?” I asked.

“Wolves do not concern me, Everson. I will be fine.”

I thought about the mystic’s impressive powers as well as the protective wards I’d sensed in her store. “All right,” I said. “But be careful. And thanks for your help.”

One less worry anyway, I thought as the connection clicked off.

Seconds later, the phone rang. Vega checked the number and pressed the phone to her ear. “What’s going on, Camilla?”

I could make out a fit of sobbing punctuated by attempts at speech.

“I can’t understand you,” Vega said. “Take a deep breath and try again.”

There was a pause as her sitter inhaled, but her exhale turned into a sobbing wail. Amid the bawling, all I could make out was a name. An ice-cold hand closed around my heart.

“What about Tony?” Vega said.

Sobs surrounded more distorted word fragments.

“What about my son?” Vega repeated, shouting over the noise. “Are you at the apartment? Stay there, I’m on my way.”

Vega hung up and stared at the road ahead, the engine rising another octave.

I pictured the beautiful, curly-haired boy in the photo Vega had given Hoffman.

God, please let him be okay.

I FOLLOWED Vega as she sprinted up the stairwell of her apartment

building and charged onto her floor. At her broken door, Vega stopped, firearm drawn. She pushed the door open with a foot.

"Camilla?" Vega called, stepping into the apartment.

The sobbing I'd heard on the phone returned, now emerging from Vega's bedroom. When Camilla appeared, she was holding a young boy. "He—he back, Ricki," Camilla managed amid the sobs. "They br-bring him back."

Vega holstered her weapon and rushed forward. She took her son from Camilla and held him up at arm's length. Tony blinked around blearily. Vega examined the fresh Band-Aid on the side of his neck, then looked the rest of him over. "Are you all right, honey? Are you hurt anywhere?"

When he didn't answer, Vega looked back at me.

I opened my wizard's senses until I could see the boy's aura.

"He's himself," I said after a moment. "He hasn't been turned into anything."

Vega sighed and pulled her son to her, burying her nose in his hair. Tony clamped his arms around her neck. "Thank God," she whispered, rocking him back and forth while Camilla looked on, crying more tears of relief. "You're safe, honey," Vega said. "Momma's got you."

She disappeared with her son into her bedroom.

"They bring him back," Camilla said to me, as though still trying to convince herself it had happened. "The men bring him back."

"The ones in suits?"

Camilla nodded. It appeared we had met Arnaud's terms, whatever the intentions behind them.

Ten minutes later, Vega emerged from her bedroom and closed the door softly. "He looks fine, but I'm going to take him to a doctor later this morning," she said. "Make sure he's all right."

While Camilla wrung her hands in prayerful thanks, Vega walked me to the door.

I pointed to her stomach. "Be sure to get yourself to a doctor, too."

"I will," she said stiffly.

"Look, I'm really sorry about…" I cocked my head toward the bedroom.

Though Vega nodded, her eyes remained unmoved. "I appreciate all of your help, Croft, but I meant what I said earlier. This is where our partnership ends." She shook her head when I tried to talk. "I know you didn't mean for anything to happen, but it did. I can't work with someone who would put my child at risk like that and not tell me, regardless of the circumstances."

I pressed my lips together. What could I say? She was absolutely right.

She extended her hand, but not to shake. "I need my pager back."

I pulled the iron-encased device from my pocket but hesitated before relinquishing it. “You have every right to feel the way you do,” I said. “I screwed up. Badly. All I can say is that it will never happen again.”

“The pager,” she repeated.

I wanted to add that I would help her wherever and whenever she needed me. All she had to do was ask. But I knew my words would change nothing. I set the pager in her palm.

“I’ll call you a cab,” she said.

I remembered how vulnerable Vega had looked after I’d patched up her bullet wound, how I’d kissed her cheek. It was the first time I had considered her a friend, someone I cared about. “Ricki, I…”

“I’d prefer it if you waited outside.”

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I returned to my West Village apartment just before seven a.m. Instead of opening my door, I paused to lean against it, my blood-stained jacket over my cane arm, a heavy shroud over my heart. In the last twelve hours we had prevented a gang war, stopped a homicidal creature, saved a young woman, and seen the safe return of Vega's son. For all intents and purposes we had won.

And yet I felt like a colossal failure.

I had lost Caroline to the fae. I had lost Vega to her own good judgment. And I had played into Arnaud's hands somehow—I was sure of it. I was also sure that nothing good would come of the last.

I sighed and inserted the key into the top bolt and twisted. Already unlocked. My heart sped up. Ditto the other two bolts. I thought back. My last visit to the apartment had been a frantic race to collect some items before Moretti's men arrived. Had I forgotten to lock the door? No, more likely Moretti's men had picked the locks when they'd come looking for me.

But my wizard's intuition was telling me different.

I dropped my jacket and drew my cane apart, my chest hot and aching around the bullet wound. I rechecked the wards before opening the door.

The apartment was dark, the drapes drawn across the tall windows. I knew I hadn't done that. I scanned the sitting area, looking for Tabitha's glowing green eyes. Instead, I found a silhouette of the back of a head in my reading chair.

"You've had quite the night," the intruder said.

I turned on the flood lights. A white mane of hair glowed into view at the same moment I inhaled an odor of leather and musk.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded. "How did you get in?"

"You invited me," Arnaud replied calmly.

"Invited you? What in the hell are you talking about?"

I rounded the chair, staff and sword held out, until the vampire Arnaud waxed into full view. He wore a black cape over his stylish suit, one knee crossed over the other. On the right armrest, he held a glass of Scotch. Arnaud grinned as he gave the drink a light swirl.

"Yes, yesterday," he said. "I asked if you would prefer to meet at

your place the next time, and you assented."

I tightened and then relaxed my grip on my weapons. The vampire had baited me into issuing an invitation, one that would temper my wards. And in the confusion of the opiate mist, I had obliged him, dammit.

"Well, I uninvite you now," I said. "Get out."

He chuckled. "The power of invitations doesn't work that way. You can only prevent me from returning."

I looked around for Tabitha.

Arnaud followed my gaze. "Your companion didn't much care for me. We had some words, I'm afraid. My, what a tongue she has." He waved a hand at my distressed look. "The feline is quite all right. Rather than tolerate my company, she elected to go out onto the ledge."

I relaxed slightly. I couldn't have handled another loss. Even Tabitha's.

"That doesn't change the fact you're not welcome here."

"I've surmised as much by the quality of your sauce." He looked down at his glass with a slight grimace. "But that is beside the point for now. Have you forgotten our blood deal?"

"Blood deal?"

"I said that if the arrangement concluded to everyone's satisfaction, I might have some information concerning your mother."

I stiffened. The deal had gotten buried beneath the desperateness of the night, one emergency after another—and the idiotic gamble I had made with Vega's son. I studied Arnaud's waxen face. *Did* he know something about my mother, or was this just another one of his games? I lowered myself onto the couch opposite him, knowing better than to appear too interested.

"I don't deal with scumbags who kidnap children for leverage," I said.

"Yes, but one cannot argue with the results, Mr. Croft. Besides, didn't you agree to the terms?"

Shame burned over my face. Instead of acknowledging his question, I asked one of my own. "What results?"

"Why don't you tell me? Let's see how much the weekend has taught you." He grinned as he sipped the whiskey.

"Mayor Lowder hired you to protect his stepdaughter," I said in a tired monotone, like a child reciting a catechism. "Which is why you deployed your blood slaves to the crime scene and ordered Vega and me to stay away from Ferguson Towers. Penny Lowder wanted her daughter dead so as not to jeopardize her husband's reelection and her own grip on power."

"Very good, Mr. Croft. And kudos for restoring dear Alexandra to

her sentient form. Though you failed to follow my instructions to the letter at various junctures, I awarded you and the detective make-up points for saving the child. I understand she was placed in someone's stewardship?" He flashed a teasing smile.

I squinted at him. How would he know that? Unless Lady Bastet had made a gross error in divination.

"Alexandra was placed in *your* care?"

"You seem concerned."

"Well, gee, excuse me. I mean, why should I care that she was handed over to a cold-blooded killer?"

"Cold-blooded toward your kind, perhaps."

"But warm and cuddly toward a half-vampire?"

"Or a half-Thorne."

The fight fell out of me as I stammered silently. "She's yours?"

Arnaud watched me above his glass as he took another sip of whiskey.

"I thought Sonny Shoat was the father."

"The despicable Sonny Shoat was Penny's employer," Arnaud said. "And the vampire fancied her, yes, but she was looking for someone more powerful. When the opportunity presented itself, she exercised her seductions on me—which I could hardly blame her for—but vampires and werewolves have an embattled history, as you likely know. It could never have worked. When her bid for my protection failed, Penny turned to the mortal world."

I remembered what Lady Bastet had said about two men of significance in Penny's life: one weak, the other strong. Mayor Lowder had been the man of weakness, Arnaud Thorne the man of strength.

"So where money fortifies you," I said, "politics now fortifies her."

"Precisely," Arnaud hissed.

"And that's what you wanted us to find out?"

"For decades, your cognitive scientists have clamored that the surest way to assimilate new information is through direct experience. While the detective correctly deduced that I was bound by an agreement, had I told you all you ultimately learned, it might have gone in one ear and out the other. And besides, it would only have been my word."

"Why, though? What does Penny pulling the mayor's strings have to do with anything?"

"As I said, the best investors cover all sides of a trade."

"Mayor Lowder promised you something in exchange for protecting his stepdaughter..." *If not money, then what?* I wondered. I thought about what vampires valued most. "Protection," I said.

"We'd come to a certain agreement," Arnaud confirmed.

"Protection from what, though?"

“From *who*, Mr. Croft. And I believe you can answer that for yourself.”

“His wife?”

“Our kinds don’t get along, but in rejecting her I made that enmity personal. I would have liked very much for you to have destroyed her. As I understand it, you came close. I don’t know that it would have mattered, though,” he added, as though to himself. “Wheels are already in motion.”

“Wheels? What wheels?”

“Look around yourself, Everson. An election year, a close race, and more and more New Yorkers becoming aware that not only is their city crumbling, it’s being overrun by undesirables.”

I remembered the ghouls I’d seen in the East Village, digging through the garbage in the light of dusk. “So, what, the mayor’s going to announce some sort of plan to combat the supernaturals?”

“In Europe they called it a *purge*.”

“But Penny’s one of them,” I said.

“Which is precisely why she fought so hard to expunge her past.”

“The deal you made with the mayor—it was that you’d be exempted from the purge, wasn’t it?”

“I think you now appreciate how fragile that agreement is,” he said.

Yeah, I thought with a tired snort, *probably about as fragile as the deal Vega and I struck with the mayor*. “But I thought you controlled the city’s purse strings. Why not leverage your financial power?”

He smiled bitterly. “It seems the mood of the nation is shifting. There is talk of the U.S. government bailing the city out of its debt. The country is hardly solvent itself, but more and more politicians are becoming uncomfortable with the power institutions like mine wield.”

“And if the bailout goes through, City Hall won’t need your money.”

“You’re a quick study, Mr. Croft.”

“So that’s what this whole thing was about, wasn’t it?” I said, anger shaking my voice. “To make me an enemy of City Hall, too. That way you’d have an ally should Mayor Lowder renege and come after you.”

“Oh, wipe that sourpuss look from your face, Mr. Croft. It wouldn’t be the first time the interests of vampires and wizards coincided. Your grandfather certainly wasn’t above joining forces when the need arose. Indeed, you’re sitting here today because of it.”

The foul fumes of resentment clouded over my exhaustion, leaving me feeling faint and sick. “Tell me whatever you know about my mother and get out.”

“Ah, about that. I’ve decided to give you a choice.” He reached

into a coat pocket and held up the ring his blood slave had ripped from my finger the night before. The rearing dragon flashed dully in the faint light. “You can have the information on your mother, or you can have your grandfather’s ring.”

I automatically reached for the ring, then hesitated and pulled back.

“Very good.” Arnaud’s eyes sparkled as he pocketed the ring again. “About twenty years before his death, your grandfather came to see me.”

“He did?”

“Yes, it was just as unexpected for me. Following our campaign in Europe, we drifted apart, pursued our own interests. While I built my empire in lower Manhattan, your grandfather worked an assortment of odd jobs, at one point as a common magician, before choosing the insurance trade. It puzzled me. I had seen him on the battlefield, and believe me when I tell you he was exceptionally powerful. On the night he came to see me, however, he was exceptionally inebriated. The poor man could barely hold himself up. His coat and hat were waterlogged, and the state of his shoes told me he’d been kicking around the filthy streets for hours. He asked for another drink, and I obliged him. ‘They killed her,’ he murmured into his glass. ‘My God, they killed her.’”

I straightened. “My mother?”

“I can only presume. Her death announcement appeared in the paper the following day. Sudden illness.”

That was what I had been told as well. “Who’s *they*? Who killed her?”

“Your grandfather never said. He left shortly after his arrival.”

“So why tell you?”

Arnaud gave a small shrug. “Who can say? Perhaps his drunkenness exaggerated whatever kinship he may have felt from our shared past. Or perhaps he had no one else to confide in.”

I studied the tips of my own filthy shoes, feeling cold and small. I thought back to Grandpa’s fury when I snuck into his locked study at thirteen. I remembered the flash of his sword, his stern admonition: *You must not be foolish, Everson. Things heard cannot be unheard. Things seen unseen. Things spoken unspoken. And it is this last that is most important for those of our blood.*

There was so much he hadn’t wanted me to know—about him, about myself. That had become clear to me over the years. But was it because of what had happened to his daughter, my mother?

“Well, then,” Arnaud said abruptly, placing the empty glass on an end table and pushing himself to his feet. “It seems all agreements have been satisfied. Until we meet again, remember what you’ve

learned these last days. The city will be changing, and not for the better, I'm afraid. Not where our kind are concerned. Be alert for the signs, Mr. Croft. The changes may come quick and violent."

His black cape floated up as he paced to the door, opened it, and then shut it behind him.

I remained on the couch, not sure whether to finish healing my injuries and take a badly needed shower or to curl into a fetal position, close my eyes, and wish the rest of the world away.

They killed her. My God, they killed her.

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I decided to save the fetal position for another time. I willed myself to the shower, where hot water soon dissolved the dirt and dried blood and sent them swirling down the drain. I treated my injuries. I fed Tabitha, forced down a bowl of cereal, and climbed into bed. The last thirty hours collapsed against my buzzing consciousness, dropping me into a dreamless abyss.

I was awakened by knocking. I opened my eyes to a night-dark apartment. I had slept through the day.

The knocking resumed. I rolled onto my other side, away from the front door, but when the knocking returned a third time, I sat up.

What now?

After a stop in the bathroom to scoop water against my face and swish some mouthwash, I cinched my robe and, cane in grip, squinted through the peephole. I quickly twisted the bolts and opened the door.

"Caroline?" I stammered, turning on the floodlights. "What are you doing here?"

"May I?" she asked, stepping past me.

I locked the door behind her and took her coat, hanging my cane beside it on the rack. Though fae power moved around her, she wore mortal attire: a white blouse and long khaki skirt, leather boots.

She turned toward me, a heaviness in her eyes.

"What is it?" I asked.

She stepped forward until it only seemed natural for me to hold her. She slipped her arms beneath mine and around my back and nestled her head against my shoulder. She rocked me slowly, her warmth pulsating against me.

"My father's cancer is in remission," she said.

I nodded over her. "I'm glad to hear that. I really am."

"Everson…" She paused and held me tighter. "I'm still getting used to this, to being fae, but I can feel things I couldn't before. I never knew the depths of your emotions around, you know, us. I should have seen it."

"Or maybe I should have just told you."

She leaned back and studied my face. I wasn't sure what she saw, but I didn't try to hide anything. I was too spent. She kissed each of

my cheeks, her lips soft against my whiskers. Healing energy whispered through me. When she looked at me again, I sensed her reluctance to pull away.

I couldn't watch her leave a second time.

Inhaling the perfume of her magic, I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers. The kiss deepened, and we moved in a dizzying slow dance. Across the living room, into my bedroom, across the bed.

I pushed everything else away. My fallout with Vega, my mother's death, Arnaud's warning about a coming purge, Caroline's marriage to a fae. I shoved them clear from the thrumming now.

When we came up for air, I looked down on her. With her golden hair fanning against the white bedspread and over the shoulders of her open blouse, her blue-green eyes gleamed up at me. I saw in them fear and at the same time a determination to hold onto her old world.

I smoothed each slender eyebrow with a finger and kissed her forehead.

"I do love you," I said. "But are you sure about this?"

She nodded and pulled me back to her.

"I'm sure," she breathed.

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Purge City

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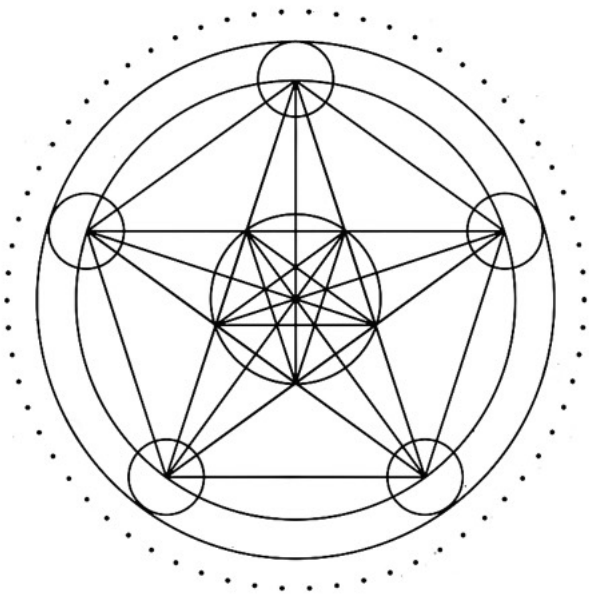
Book 3



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1

"*Svelare.*" The word vibrated from my mouth, dispelling the magical veil over my floor-to-ceiling bookcase.

I paced the length of the shelves as encyclopedias and academic texts rippled and became magical tomes and grimoires. At a flaking, leather-bound tome, I stopped and pulled it from its slot. A book of Final Passage.

I flipped it open to a marked page and set the book on a stand on my iron table. My gaze roamed across the ornate script to an old and sacred ritual that ensured swift passage for the deceased by calling forth a gatekeeper.

I took a resolute breath and nodded. I was going for it.

For the past week I'd studied the ritual, weighing the pros and cons of actually enacting it. But it wasn't like the Order had left me a choice. After several inquiries into my mother's death, the first sent four months ago, I hadn't received a single response. Not even a boilerplate: "*We appreciate your correspondence. Please be patient as we look into the matter.*"

So, yeah, the Order could bite me.

I consulted the book and some notes I'd jotted into the margins as I pulled spell items from my storage bins. Before long, the table top was arrayed with candles, an urn of graveyard dirt, a funeral veil soaked with a copal resin, a bloodstone, and a manhole-sized standing mirror. On the table's far end was the porcelain hair brush that had belonged to my mother when she was a girl, two strands of her light-brown hair caught in its bristles.

Two chances to get this right, I thought.

I walked in a circle, sprinkling the graveyard dirt into a symbol of the dead. I then placed five candles around the circle's perimeter and, chanting, lit them in a star-shaped sequence. As the flames rose and thinned, the room seemed to dim and cool by several degrees.

At the center of the circle, I propped the mirror on its stand and then placed the bloodstone and a strand of hair drawn from my mother's brush before it, covering both with the funeral veil.

"And now for my insurance…"

Focusing on the coin pendant that hung from a chain around my

neck, I incanted softly, lips, tongue, and tone imbuing the family symbol with energy. The coin began to hum over my sternum. I switched chants, encasing the coin in a small shield.

If I calculated correctly, the energy building up in the coin would overwhelm the shield spell in about five minutes. A time bomb for if things went sideways.

"Gatekeeper," I whispered in an ancient tongue as I stood from the circle and drew my sword from my cane. *"You who grant passage to the dead and the dying, who safeguard the In Between. I beseech you to carry our beloved to the world beyond, to spirit her soul with all haste."* Wincing, I drew the sword's blade across my palm. I held the wounded hand forward, allowing the blood to drip over the artifacts in the center of the circle.

"Take her," I said.

The charcoal smell of the copal thickened, and the room dimmed further. A sound like distant thunder rumbled in. Black clouds filled the mirror and began twisting into a deep vortex.

"She is ready to pass, and time is short," I said, the spell elements amplifying the power of my mother's hair, wrapping it in a potent aura of fresh death. *"Take her!"* I repeated, fog issuing from my breath now.

The rumbling deepened and a powerful entity, more shadow than form, emerged into the circle and drifted over the blood-spattered objects.

Aiming my staff at the circle, I cried, *"Cerrare!"*

The portal behind the mirror slammed shut. The gatekeeper jerked up and then circled several times, as though sensing its confined state. When the entity stopped, empty sockets, impossibly deep, stared back at me. A whispering voice spoke, raking me with chills.

"She is already claimed."

I went mute as I studied the being as ancient as humankind. Left to its work, a gatekeeper was harmless. When tricked and trapped, not so much. But I needed to know what had happened to my mother, and a gatekeeper could tell me.

"Yes, I know," I responded between grunts. Though I'd closed the portal, I could feel a force beyond, like a riptide, pulling back toward the In Between. Even at my full strength, I wouldn't be able to withstand the pull for long. Beings from that plane didn't belong here.

"I need to know how she died," I said.

The room rattled around me. "Release me, mortal."

"I will once you tell me."

"Release me or I will claim *you*."

I planted my feet and leaned away from the riptide until I was nearly sitting, but the force only strengthened. My right foot stuttered

through the graveyard dirt. The containment broken, a frigid hand emerged from the circle and seized my ankle. The cold bit into me like blades slicing into bone. I let out a ragged cry, but I was determined to get an answer.

"Tell me … what happened … to my mother!"

A second hand seized my knee and pulled me toward the portal. This wasn't going to work. I had to abort the summoning.

"Liberare!" I shouted.

The portal blew open like an emergency hatch on an airplane. The gatekeeper disappeared into the mirror, sucked back to its realm. But its ice-cold hands hadn't released me.

I fell and twisted onto my stomach, dropping my sword and staff. They tumbled off behind me as though reality had rotated on a ninety-degree axis. My fingers scrabbled over the floor for purchase. When coldness enveloped my lower half, I realized I had entered the mirror.

I gripped the mirror's metal frame and struggled to kick my way back out. The numbness climbed like water to my chest, my chin. In the next moment, my head went under.

Stunned, I stared around a luminescent darkness of shifting shapes and roaring energies. I was in the realm between life and death. The In Between.

Fingers slipping, I peeked between my legs. The gatekeeper's face stared back from the shadows like a grim reaper's.

I peered at the backside of the mirror, the image of my apartment beyond undulating into dimness. I could make out my hologram of the city, my lab table, my collection of esoteric books. A deep loneliness yawned inside me as I considered what I was holding onto: a life spent chasing nether creatures for an organization that barely tolerated, much less acknowledged, me—not even to tell me what had happened to my mother. Fallen to illness, as my grandmother had claimed? Or murdered, as insinuated by the vampire Arnaud?

At least in the afterlife I would know.

Yeah, but you'll be powerless to do anything with that knowledge, I countered, a defiant anger growing inside me.

I gathered my strength to shout a Word, but the strange ether that constituted the In Between gushed into my mouth like sea water, and no sound would emerge. The fingers of my right hand lost their grip on the mirror, and my arm fell into the cold. I could feel nothing below my chest now.

Just need to hold on for a few more…

The shield around my coin pendant fractured. For an instant, all the light drew inward, as though toward a collapsing star, before the coin's energy blew out in a detonating flash. The gatekeeper released my leg in a fading moan, and I vaulted up into my library/lab.

I landed back first into a bookcase. My head banged against the floor as tomes spilled around me. Dazed, I sat up and peered at the smoking ruins of the casting circle and fragments of shattered mirror.

“Nice timing,” I mumbled, tucking the coin back into my shirt.

My mother’s hair was gone, though, taken by the gatekeeper. Meaning only one strand remained to cast from.

Maybe it was time to consult an expert.

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2

Lady Bastet held the strand of hair on either end, her deep green eyes seeming to stare inside it. She hadn't moved for the last minute, the flatness of her dark face speaking to mild entrancement.

I gazed around the room in the back of her basement-level rug business. Beyond the tendrils of incense, a dozen or so cats stared back from shelves that held assortments of Egyptian charms and spell items. Lady Bastet had helped Detective Vega and me with a case in the spring in which her powers of divination had played a critical role. I was counting on her being able to duplicate that success.

"Yes," the mystic said suddenly. "The potential for magic once moved through these cells."

"What do you mean *potential?*"

"You did not tell me your mother's hair was from when she was a girl," she replied, setting it flat on the stone table in front of her. "She inherited magic from at least one of her parents, yes, but whether or not she ever developed that magic, I cannot tell you from a simple reading."

I noted her emphasis on the word *simple*. "You need to go deeper?"

She pushed up the band holding her thick hair from her kohl-lined eyes. "Yes, far deeper."

"Your price?"

"Your blood," she replied.

I had given her a vial's worth the last time, about which I'd been none too comfortable. Wizard's blood could be used in powerful magic, and if that magic turned black, well … I would be in just as much trouble as the practitioner. "Can I ask what you did with the last sample?"

"I put it to good use," she replied enigmatically.

That the Order hadn't been in touch told me the blood had probably been used for benign purposes. Lady Bastet specialized in potion mixing, from anti-aging elixirs to male enhancement brews.

Better not to think about it, I decided, rolling up my left shirt sleeve to my elbow. Even though I had undergone the procedure before, the sensation of her wooden needle sucking the blood from my bulging vessel was no less skin-crawling.

Lady Bastet returned the wooden needle to her hair, healed the puncture, and set the clay tube with my blood into her wooden box. When she returned to the table and drew away the veil that covered her scrying globe, I leaned forward, my stomach twisting into anxious knots.

She smiled apologetically. “I should have told you, Everson. For the kind of reading you’re asking, I am going to need time.”

“How much?”

“Until dusk,” she said. “This hair belongs to a young girl. It represents her life to that point, beyond which lies a tangle of possible futures. I will need to comb them out, to align myself with the path she ultimately traveled—up to and including her death.”

“Also, anything you can learn about my father…”

I knew even less about him than about my mother. According to Nana, my mother and father had met at a hippie commune upstate. Their relationship lasted just long enough for me to form a bump in my mother’s belly before my father—whose name Nana couldn’t remember—decided it was time to move on. Heartbroken, my mother returned home.

That had been the official story, anyway. But like with my mother’s death, it now lacked a certain ring of truth.

Lady Bastet nodded. “I will tell you all I come to see.”

I glanced down at the strand of hair, the final cellular link to my mother, the final link to the truth, maybe.

“I really need you to get this right,” I said, raising my eyes to Lady Bastet’s, but she gave no sign she’d heard. She leaned nearer, as though trying to read something beyond my face. I felt movement through my mind like fingers over a stringed instrument. Minor notes played fast, speeding my pulse. When Lady Bastet spoke, her voice was husky and distant.

“Trust in the one your heart trusts least.”

“I’m sorry?” I said, the words catching in my short breaths.

She sat back, eyes returning to the here and now. She gazed at my mother’s hair again. “With enough time, the reading will be the right one,” she said in response to my earlier question, as though she hadn’t just spaced out or spoken. “But are you certain this is what you want?”

My heart and breaths wound down again. *Why do you need to know?* she seemed to be asking. *Out of simple curiosity or from that age-old lust that has twisted many a man’s heart into darkness: revenge?*

“Yes,” I said. “It’s what I want.”

Lady Bastet nodded once. “Then it will be done.”

I SQUINTED into a liquid heat that rose from the West Village sidewalks and wobbled the buildings up and down the block. The mercury was forecast to climb over one hundred again today.

I checked my watch. The time, which had slowed way down in Lady Bastet's, seemed to have sped back up to the present and then some. If I didn't hurry, I was going to be late for my summer term class. Cane pinned under an arm, I hustled toward the nearest bus stop.

Within a block, sweat was streaming from my armpits and soaking through the back of my shirt. But I was more bothered by the knowledge someone was keeping pace with me. I peeked over a shoulder to find a young man in a tailored suit gliding around newsstands and oncoming pedestrians. His effortless speed, coupled with his bone-dry face, told me he was an undead.

One of Arnaud's, no doubt, I thought with a groan.

Up ahead, the city bus slowed toward the stop. I broke into a full run, arriving behind a small knot of people. When I looked back, I could no longer see the blood slave. I'd lucked out. He must've been on a different errand. When I straightened, the son of a bitch was in front of me.

"Go ahead," he was telling the driver of the crowded bus. "We'll catch the next one."

"Wait!" I cried, trying to cut past him. The blood slave moved deftly, blocking my attempts until the driver closed the door. With a loud chuff, the bus pulled from the stop and motored away.

"What the hell are you doing?" I said.

Like all of Arnaud's blood slaves, this one was young, his face smooth and handsome. Chilly blue eyes regarded me from beneath waxy eyebrows and a professional cut of brown hair.

"Arnaud Thorne would like you to see something," he answered.

"Well, tell him too fucking bad. I have a class to teach."

I hadn't heard from the vampire Arnaud since he'd held Detective Vega's son hostage in a game whose ultimate intent was to pit me against City Hall. He had cost me my friendship with Vega not to mention my contract with the NYPD. I couldn't imagine what he wanted me to see, or more likely get involved in, and I didn't care. I was done with Arnaud.

I spotted an on-duty taxi coming up Sixth Avenue and waved.

The blood slave gripped my arm and forced it down. "My CEO insists," he said.

The cab zoomed past.

Okay, that's it.

Stepping back, I yanked my cane into sword and staff. I angled the blade so sunlight glinted off a line of bright metal. "You see that? It's a

little something called silver, a modification I made to better deal with your kind. Touch me again, and you're going to lose an arm."

The blood slave's lips broke upwards as his eyes sharpened. "Oh, come now, Mr. Croft," he said in a familiar, taunting voice. "Don't shoot the messenger. Or amputate him, as the case may be. I rather prefer him with all limbs intact." Arnaud had taken possession of his minion.

"What do you want?" I demanded.

"Like my associate said, for you to see something. We needn't go far. Why, that little establishment across the way should do."

I glanced over at the hole in the wall whose vertical sign read BAR. "Not interested."

"Oh, but I think you will be, Mr. Croft. I think you'll be *very* interested."

Something in the certainty with which Arnaud spoke made me hesitate. Or was that the vampire's power insinuating its way into my thoughts. I steeled my mind and cocked my sword arm.

"If you're not out of my face in the next second, I'll skip the amputation and go straight to execution."

"My associate is perfectly within his rights to occupy this public piece of sidewalk, Mr. Croft. And you should know that I will continue to badger you until you acquiesce to my request. Ten minutes of your time is all I ask. I will even pay your cab fare following. You'll arrive at the college before the bus you've just missed."

I squinted at him. "And you'll leave me alone?"

"You have my assurances, Mr. Croft."

Unlike agreements between mortals, a vampire's word held an innate binding power. Once made, especially by a vampire of Arnaud's stature, they were hard to break. What in the hell was he up to?

"Leave me alone, as in never seek me out again?" I asked, to be certain we were on the same page.

"Indeed. *Should* we meet again, it will be because you have come to me."

I snorted. "Well, that's not gonna happen."

"All right." He clapped once. "It sounds like we have an agreement."

I sighed and sheathed my sword.

"Let's get this over with."

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3

The blood slave held the door open for me, and we stepped into the dim bar. An assortment of fans blew around the stink of spilled beer, wet cigarettes, and what smelled like vomit from a back bathroom.

"Charming, isn't it?" Arnaud said through his slave, then glided toward the long bar. At one end, a trio of barflies sagged on stools, faces transfixed on the glow of a baseball game. The bartender, a hefty man in an undershirt with muddy sweat stains beneath the pits, stared at the game too.

"Ahoy, there!" Arnaud called with false cheer.

The bartender's head was eggplant shaped, broad at the jaw but smaller and shining around his crown. It rotated slightly as he shifted his smallish eyes toward us, his bulk remaining aligned with the mounted TV.

"My associate and I could use a cold drink on this hot day. A pair of scotch on the rocks, if you will." Arnaud scanned the top shelf of liquor bottles before stopping and pointing at a dusty bottle with a red label. "That one will do. And make them doubles, my good friend."

The bartender screwed up his eyes as though trying to decide whether Arnaud was toying with him. When the vampire set a pair of fifty-dollar bills on the scratched bar, the bartender must have decided he didn't care. Heaving himself from his languid lean, he plodded over to the bottle Arnaud had indicated and began pouring our drinks.

"Not the quickest study," Arnaud said to me as he climbed onto a stool, not bothering to lower his voice. "But beggars can't be choosers."

"You said ten minutes," I reminded him as I took the neighboring stool.

"Let's see…" Arnaud checked his slender wristwatch. "Yes, perfect timing."

As the bartender set our drinks in front of us, Arnaud pushed one of the fifties forward. "This will cover our beverages as well as a generous gratuity—despite that you only poured one shot apiece and then attempted to disguise the deception with common tap water."

The bartender's face clenched. "You calling me a cheat?"

"*This*…" Arnaud tapped the second fifty, ignoring the bartender's

show of aggression. "…will be for additional services provided."

The bartender's gaze fell to the bill. "What services?" he asked suspiciously.

Arnaud broke into sudden laughter. "Oh, no, no. Nothing like that, my strapping friend. No, we would just like to procure your television for a short while."

The bartender's head twisted to look up at the TV. On the screen, an outfielder fielded a fly ball. When the bartender turned back to us, his brow was a bed of confusion lines. He scratched his stubbly chin.

"He'd like to change the channel," I said, acting as translator.

"The Mets are playing," the bartender said, as if that settled the question.

"And playing delightedly, I have little doubt." Arnaud checked his watch again. "However, we are interested in something for which time is of the utmost essence. And what we're offering in exchange is more than sufficient compensation. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Can't do it," he said. "Those guys at the end of the bar? The only reason they come here is for the games. They'd kill me."

The smile on Arnaud's face stiffened, and before I could anticipate his next words, he seized the bartender's throat. "I assume you're speaking figuratively in regards to your friends," he said in a fierce whisper. "I, however, am not, so I advise you to listen carefully."

The bartender gargled, his bald head already turning red.

"You are going to accept our payment," Arnaud said, "and you are going to change the channel, or I will crush your windpipe and end your pathetic life right here. Do you understand?"

"Hey, c'mon," I whispered, unlocking the sword inside my cane, ready to step to the man's defense.

The bartender pawed toward Arnaud's face, but a crunch of cartilage made him reconsider. He nodded desperately, his bulging eyes beginning to weep. In Arnaud's eyes, I saw a hunger to kill. But in the next moment, his hand popped open, dropping the bartender on the bar.

"Jesus," I breathed, notching my sword again. I peeked at the patrons. Their gazes hadn't moved from the television.

"There, there, my friend," Arnaud said, patting the bartender's heaving back. "Take a moment to collect yourself—a glass of water, if you need it—then kindly change the channel to four. Oh, and the shotgun you're reaching for is no longer beneath the bar. I removed it earlier in the event negotiations failed. I'm pleased we were able to arrive at a mutual understanding."

Arnaud slid the other fifty forward. The bartender stopped groping under the bar. He pulled a dish towel from his sagging pants to wipe his face, eyeing the fifty as though it might bite him.

"Go on," Arnaud said, "you've earned it."

The bartender took the bill and shoved it into a pocket. Protests rose from the barflies as he reached up and changed the channel. The ballgame flipped to a young woman making an impassioned plea to a grim-faced man over the custody of their child.

"A soap opera?" I said.

Arnaud held up a finger. "A moment."

Seconds later, the soap opera switched to a feed of Mayor Budge Lowder standing in front of a podium stacked with microphones.

"We interrupt this program for a special news conference," an off-camera news anchor said. *"The mayor is set to announce what he is calling a 'brave, new initiative' that could mean sweeping changes for the city of New York. We go live now to City Hall."*

As Budge wiped a cowlick of hair from his pudgy face and adjusted his round glasses, my thoughts cast back to the showdown at his mansion. Vega and I battling the mayor's wife and her werewolf brethren; Budge shooting me; me shooting his wife; Vega negotiating our release by blackmailing Budge and Penny with information we discovered during our investigation.

As it turned out, we hadn't had to worry about Penny. The shot that had ruptured her aorta had plunged her into a coma, where she still remained. All summer long, Budge had been keeping the public abreast of her condition. It seemed to have had an effect, stalling his falling poll numbers despite the multitude of problems besieging his crumbling metropolis.

I guessed sympathy still held sway.

"How's everyone doing?" Budge asked from the podium. *"Good, good. As always, I'll start with an update on my beloved wife, after whom so many of you have been asking and offering your well wishes. At last count, we've been sent enough plants and flowers to turn Central Park into a profitable nursery."* He chuckled with the crowd of reporters, then paused as though to gather himself. *"Penny remains in a coma, but her doctors say she's stable. In fact, they're telling me I should talk to her because she can probably hear what I'm saying. So I've been telling her a few things. First, that what happened to her is my fault."* He raised his hands to the murmured protests. *"No, listen, listen. All you've been told was that she fell into a coma, but you don't know how she ended up there. I think it's time you heard."*

"Here it comes," Arnaud said above his glass.

"What?" I asked nervously.

"The Big Reveal."

"My wife was attacked," Budge announced.

The blood fell from my face. *He's going to out me,* I thought. *He's going to implicate me in his wife's attempted murder. Probably Vega, too.*

And with all of the sympathy pouring toward Budge and his wife, the city will eat us alive. My eyes shot toward the door.

Arnaud's cold fingers rested on my forearm. "A moment."

On the television, Budge patted the air, assuring the press he would answer their burst of questions after he finished his announcement. *"Yes, she was attacked,"* he continued. *"But here's the thing. The entire City of New York is under attack. I'd heard the rumors and reports. But I ignored them. It took what happened to my dear wife to finally see the light. I'm talking about supernaturals. Beings that shouldn't exist. But I'm telling you, they do exist, and they're here. They're in our city. And they threaten each and every one of us."*

Instead of quieting the reporters, Budge used their swelling voices to bolster his own voice, like a preacher at a tent revival. *"Many of you have seen them. Some of you have been pursued by them. A few of you have lost loved ones to them. But not any more. Not in my city."*

In recent months, I'd observed an increasing number of ghouls scavenging the East Village garbage piles, a story even serious papers were starting to pick up. The monsters had graduated from the tabloids.

"Hey," one of the barflies said, "you remember that thing that chased us down Avenue C a couple months ago?"

"Yeah, yeah," his buddy replied. "Big and ugly with long arms. Think it was one of them supernaturals?"

The bartender shushed them.

"That's the second thing I'm telling Penny while she's fighting for her life," Budge continued. *"That the monster who attacked her isn't going to get away. We're going to hunt him down, along with every other supernatural that has infested our city, and we're going to eradicate them."*

"Damned straight," the third barfly said.

"So I stand before my city today to announce the creation of a one-hundred person force within the NYPD." He turned and opened an arm toward a late middle-aged black man with a somber face and thick mustache. *"Headed by Captain Lance Cole, the Hundred will lead the effort to root out and destroy the supernatural scourge on our city. The monsters are the true root of evil. Not taxes or the lack of city services or any of the peripheral issues my opponent would have you believe. Once the monsters are eradicated, once the streets and parks are safe, I promise you, the people and businesses that fled will come storming back, restoring our great city to glory."* He threw his arms out with this final pronouncement.

"So now you see," Arnaud said as Budge began to take questions.

I swallowed and tried to find my voice. "Yeah, but he spoke of monsters, not wizards."

"You know as well as I that he's not going to distinguish between

the two. Not after what befell his wife."

"No thanks to you."

"Be that as it may, the question now is how you plan to negotiate the new terrain."

I looked down the bar to where the bartender had wandered over. He and the patrons were huddled in conversation. As I turned back to Arnaud, my head ached with the beginning of a migraine.

"I feel an offer coming," I said.

"Or perhaps a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"Let me guess, a new pact between wizards and vamps."

"Aligning to defend our rightful place in the city," he said.

I shook my head. "I'm not getting mixed up with you again."

"I don't see that you have a choice, Mr. Croft—that is, unless you elect to flee. But I sense that would be difficult for one whose power derives from the unique energies of the city."

He was correct to the extent that a wizard's power adapted to the environment where he practiced, to the particular pattern of ley lines. One could relocate, sure, but it took time to shape the new energies fully to his purposes—especially for a relatively new practitioner like me.

"If you do remain," Arnaud continued, "I am the only one with a fortification and sufficient personnel to defend it."

"Then why do you need me?"

"Because in the fever of war, favors are called in, strange alliances take shape, the opposition swells. Just look at any of history's great conflicts. We might soon find ourselves at a disadvantage."

"And you think I can do, what?" I said. "Round up the local wizards and march them to the Financial District? Tell them, hey, we're joining Team Vampire?"

Though I picked up magical auras around the city, I had no idea who did and who didn't belong to the Order. My organization was highly compartmentalized, either to protect its secrecy or to decrease the chances of magic-users banding together to rebel. Both explanations made sense. I was sure I wasn't the only one to have questioned the Order's authority.

"It's above my wizarding level," I said.

"Very well," Arnaud replied curtly. "I suppose it will take circumstances to convince you. Until then…" He finished his drink, dropped a twenty in front of me for the promised cab fare, and slipped off his stool. Before I could say anything, the door to the bar opened and closed in a flash of sunlight, and Arnaud was gone.

I moved my untouched drink around a small pool of condensation, the class I was supposed to teach on the bottom rung of my concerns. On the television above me, Budge rattled off more details about his

eradication program—dollar amounts, federal funding. Arnaud had forecast the development, sure. But that didn't mean I had to rush into an alliance with him, did it?

No, I decided. *I only need to inform the Order and await instructions. Which I'll do right after my class.*

I stood from my barstool, collected the twenty, and turned, only to be met by a meaty hand against my chest. I fell back onto the stool. The bartender rose over me, two of the patrons from the other end of the bar on either side of him. I looked around for the third guy but couldn't see him.

"Who was your friend?" the bartender asked.

I glanced toward the door Arnaud's blood slave had departed through. "Friend? I hardly knew the guy."

"Well, you came in here with him," the bartender said.

"Your powers of observation are astounding," I told him.

"I've never seen anyone move that fast," he said.

"Yeah," one of the barflies put in, a man with a trucker hat and thick beard.

"Really?" I said. "It probably just seemed that way because the rest of us are moving so slowly."

The patrons' brows beetled as they tried to puzzle that out. The bartender's eyes didn't shift from mine, though. He loomed nearer.

"The boys and I have been consulting," he said. "We think he might be one of those supernatural freaks the mayor's talking about. And you know what? We think you're one of them too."

"Me?" The metallic bite of adrenaline filled my mouth as my gaze jumped between them. Who were these losers—one with a head shaped like an eggplant—to call me a freak? Power stormed toward my prism.

But when I caught a whiff of leather and musk, I realized what Arnaud had done. He'd exuded an aerosol that was releasing hormones into our systems: raw fight or flight. It was the same reason he'd manhandled the bartender into changing the channel instead of using his vampiric powers of persuasion. Arnaud wanted to incite a confrontation, to underline his point that the city was aligning against us. Though my heart pounded with an urge to clash, I settled back into my seat. I'd played into Arnaud's hands once. It wasn't happening again.

"Look guys," I said, forcing a calming breath. "I'm flesh and blood, just like you. I didn't come in here to cause trouble—which would be pretty hard for someone like me anyway." I held up my cane as proof of disability.

"Hey, Bill!"

I looked over to see the third barfly, the one I'd lost track of,

emerging from the back of the bar carrying a shotgun. The stock end of the gun dripped water. “It was sitting in the crapper. That joker must’ve dropped it in there when he came in earlier to use the bathroom.”

Bartender Bill scowled. “Bring it here.”

“This cane belonged to my grandfather, actually,” I said, pushing energy into my wizard’s voice, willing their attention back to me. “Part walking aid, part novelty item. Can you make out that stone?”

The three barflies looked at one another, then at the white opal.

“What about it?” Bill growled. He had seized his gun and begun wiping the stock dry with his towel. I noted the tremor in his hands, the quavering edge to his voice. Arnaud’s toxin was still pumping through him. He wasn’t going to allow me out of his bar without a fight.

“If you look closely enough,” I said, “you can make out Playboy’s Miss June, 1948.” Gathering energy, I watched Bill’s eyes. When at last they squinted toward the opal, I shouted, *“Illuminare!”*

An intense light flashed against their faces. Shouts went up from the recoiling men. I climbed onto the bar to escape their semicircle. Bartender Bill groped toward me, but I was already into the first steps of flight. Ashtrays and beer bottles flew from my feet. The shotgun went off, and a shelf of liquor bottles erupted. Glass and alcohol rained over my back.

At the far end of the bar, I jumped down. Bill swung his shotgun toward the sound.

“Vigore!” I shouted, using a force invocation to shove two of the stumbling barflies into Bill. The bartender lumbered backwards, the shotgun blowing fire into the ceiling. Chunks of plaster rained over them.

I opened the door onto the bright blur of the West Village and then sealed the door behind me with a locking spell. Hailing a passing taxi, I climbed in, my back wet against the seat.

“Where to?” the cabbie asked.

“Midtown College,” I panted. “I’m late for a class I’m supposed to teach.”

“Looking like that?”

I followed his squinting gaze to my liquor-soaked shirt. Great. Blood from the exploding glass stippled through the fabric over my left shoulder. My back was probably bleeding too.

“Just drive,” I said. “Fast.”

As the cab pulled away from the curb, I peered around to ensure Bill and the others hadn’t escaped the bar. But more generally, I was looking to ensure the eradication program wasn’t already underway. What that would even look like, I had no idea. An increased police

presence? Mystics and diviners rousted from their shops? Magic-users in arm and leg shackles, tape over their mouths?

I scooted to the middle of the backseat, out of view of a city that suddenly felt hostile.

Goddamn you, Arnaud.

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4

Following a change of shirt and a quick grooming, I stole from the faculty bathroom and, seeing that the coast was clear, made a run for my classroom, leather satchel slapping my hip.

I turned a corner and nearly plowed into Professor Snodgrass. The diminutive chairman of my department staggered in a circle and would have fallen if I hadn't caught him. With a huff, he slapped my hands away and straightened his small glasses. He peered up at me, eyes sharpening.

"Professor *Croft*," he exclaimed, cheeks reddening in anger.

"Oh, hey, sorry about that," I said, showing an apologetic hand as I made to scoot past him. Ever since my hearing the year before, where Snodgrass had motioned to have me fired, I'd managed to stay off his radar. Part of that had entailed getting to my classes on time. The other part had meant avoiding him whenever possible. I'd just managed to blow both.

Snodgrass checked his watch. "Don't you have a seminar this hour?"

"Right, I'm headed there now."

"Ten minutes late, I see." He stepped nearer, sniffing the air. "And what's that I smell?"

I met his snooty gaze. "Alcohol."

He blinked twice in surprise before his lips pinched into a smile. "So you admit that you've been drinking, that you were preparing to instruct your students in an inebriated state?"

"Do you want the truth?"

"Please, Professor Croft." He stood back, hands clasped behind the back of his tweed suit. The man could barely disguise his glee. He would finally have a bulletproof case for my termination. The prestigious college would not tolerate a drunkard for a professor.

"All right," I said with a sigh. "I ducked into a West Village bar to watch the mayor's press conference."

"And how many drinks did you have?"

"Drinks? None, actually." I watched Snodgrass's smile fracture. "The bartender threatened me with his shotgun, so I jumped onto the bar and made a run for it. He started shooting. Bam! Bam! Glass and

liquor flew everywhere, like something out of a freaking Western. I'm fine, obviously—I know that has to be a relief for you—but I did get soaked." I chuckled. "Hence the smell."

Snodgrass's lips trembled. "I can see this is all one big joke to you, Professor Croft, but I assure you, the board takes the matter of alcoholism *very* seriously."

"As they should," I said. "But absent proof, you'd just be wasting their time. Again."

The final jab was probably one too many, but with my nerves still raw from the mayor's announcement, not to mention Arnaud's harsh toxin, I wasn't in a good place to be fucked with. I stepped past Snodgrass, but I had only gone a few paces when he called to me.

"You might be interested to hear that I've done some investigating," he said.

"Congratulations," I called back.

"I admit, it baffled me how you were able to get your arrest record expunged by this Detective *Vega*." He said her name with bitter scorn. "A few inquiries later and, lo and behold, I discover you're working as a consultant to her department. On *supernatural* cases," he added.

I stopped and turned. "What's your point?"

"Oh, no point." He adjusted his bowtie. "Just that I find it all very interesting. A professor of mythology and lore—one who had been serving a probation, no less—suddenly in the pay of the NYPD. That would require a very compelling skill set, I should think. A compelling *expertise*."

"So I've taken an academic interest in the supernatural," I said, a little too defensively. "Big deal."

"Are you sure that's all it is?"

Panic sped my breaths. "I don't know what you're getting at."

"Given your grants, the board might be willing to overlook certain … *tendencies*. But I doubt the same could be said for the parents who are paying their children's tuition. Especially now that the city has declared war on those with said tendencies."

"You're still speaking Urdu, and I'm late for my class."

"If history has taught me anything," Snodgrass shouted after me, "it's that when the leaders fail to act, you go straight to the people."

I reached my classroom to find the oscillating fan blowing a rattling circuit across the ring of desks—all empty. *Dammit.* By the college's rules, students only had to wait ten minutes for a tardy professor. I consulted my watch. My own students appeared to have followed that law to the second.

"Thanks, gang," I muttered.

I tossed my satchel and cane onto my desk and unbuttoned my shirt to my chest. Taking the fan cage in both hands, I leaned down

until the lukewarm rush of air bathed my face and billowed my shirt.

As much as I hated to admit it, Snodgrass's words had rattled me.

There's no way the man knows about my wizarding life, I reassured myself. *He may have his suspicions, but that's all they are. Snodgrass isn't going to risk his reputation by calling up parents and making wild accusations. That would only put his own job in jeopardy.*

But I had to wonder. With the mayor's announcement sure to alarm the public, would merely *insinuating* someone was a supernatural be enough to alienate him? I considered the ring of empty desks. Of course none of it mattered if I couldn't get to my own classes on time.

I smiled bitterly, remembering an era when I would have arrived to find Caroline lecturing in my stead. Afterwards, she would have scolded me, insisting it was the "last time"—like she did every time. I had started calling her "Sub," short for substitute, a joke she eventually warmed to.

Closing my eyes, I imagined her faerie-scented skin from our night together, her soft whispers, her golden tendrils of hair spilling around me. I remembered the way our bodies, our magic, had moved against the other's. Had that night even happened? A night that was becoming more ethereal with the passing months? But there it was: the ache around my heart, the bruising emptiness, like what I'd felt when I'd awoken alone the next morning.

Yeah. It had happened.

The fan blades chopped up my forlorn sigh and blew it back in my face.

"Is this a bad time?" a woman asked from behind me.

I hurried to button my shirt back up and tuck my coin pendant away. The noise of the fan had washed over the voice, so I wasn't sure who it belonged to. Someone from administration, with my luck. Maybe Snodgrass was already sowing the seeds of suspicion. But as I turned and the woman in the doorway came into focus, my arms fell slowly to my sides.

"Professor Reid," I said.

"Professor Croft," Caroline replied, her lips pressing into a smile.

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5

The last time I had seen Caroline was the night she'd come to my apartment. She disappeared the next morning without a trace. When classes resumed after the spring break, I learned she had put in for a last-minute sabbatical. She wasn't supposed to return until the fall semester, if then. After several calls that went straight to her voicemail, I gave up on trying to reach her.

Now, I took a moment to absorb the impact of her sudden manifestation. Caroline was dressed professionally—white blouse, khaki skirt, thin gold jewelry—but she carried the charged air of the fae, still subtle, but stronger than what I had felt around her the last time. The oscillating fan stirred her hair, which had been straightened, I noticed, and trimmed to her shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Caroline stepped from the doorway until she was standing in front of me. Her blue-green gaze settled on my chest, and she slid the top button of my shirt free. My breath went shallow, but I realized she was only fixing my shoddy redressing job. When she finished correcting the buttons she smoothed my shirt collar and rose onto her tiptoes. The kiss against my cheek was light, cordial.

"It's good to see you, too, Everson."

"You know what I meant." I tried not to stammer as my face warmed over. "I thought you were going to be away until the fall."

She took a seat in one of my students' desks and gestured to my desk across the ring from her. She wanted to talk but at a distance. Whether because she didn't trust me or herself, I couldn't tell. I complied, affecting a casualness that felt all wrong. Caroline smiled sympathetically. I moved my leather satchel in front of me and propped my arms on it.

"I owe you an apology," she said.

"How about an explanation?"

"That too." She clasped her hands on her desk. "The night I came to you, Everson, I was a bit of a mess. This, becoming a faerie, returning to that world … it happened so suddenly, and I … I didn't handle it very well. When I went to your apartment, it was to talk, to find my center. You're my closest friend, the only one who would

have understood what I was experiencing. But your feelings—they hit me hard." She studied her hands for a moment. A silver band glistened on her left ring finger. "I'm afraid I let them overwhelm me."

"So that night was a mistake," I said numbly.

"That's not what I'm saying. I went along with what happened. I *wanted* what happened." When she looked up, her eyes wavered with emotion. "But it was irresponsible. Worse, it was unfair to you. That's why I left like I did. As much for the loyalty I owed Angelus as his wife as for the loyalty I owed you as my friend. I needed to—"

"I'm sorry, Caroline," I interrupted, "but what I felt from you that night went waaay beyond friendship."

"I know. But it can't anymore. That's what I'm saying. I have duties now, responsibilities."

"Bigger than this, than us?" Having her answer that terrified me, but I needed to know.

"Yes," she said. "Bigger than us."

I sensed there was something she wasn't telling me. "Are you sure?"

Caroline hesitated before nodding.

"Then I guess we're done here." I angled my body toward the door, but Caroline made no move to rise from her desk.

"I didn't just come to apologize," she said.

"Gee, what else can I look forward to?"

"I've been in the faerie realm for much of these last months," she said. "At times it's felt like visiting twelfth-century Europe. The realm parallel to New York is a patchwork of feudal kingdoms, with all of the emphasis on lineages, territories, and certain decorums one would expect. Interestingly, the royalty there consider our modern world to be brutish and dirty."

"Then why spend time here?" I asked bitterly.

"Because of the portals."

"What about them?"

"They're vital to the kingdoms that control them."

Though I continued to hold myself at an angle to Caroline, I considered the implications of what she was saying. From the way she'd explained it earlier, distances scaled differently between our realms. A trip from Battery Park to the Bronx would take about thirty minutes in a cab, whereas in the faerie realm, the corresponding trip might take weeks, and often through hostile territories. "So that explains the fae's interest in the city," I said.

Caroline nodded. "Wars have been fought over those portals, treaties written. Marriages arranged," she added with lowered eyes. "Angelus's family has a kingdom in the north, a region that corresponds to a section of upper Manhattan. My mother's kingdom is

in the south. Each kingdom controls a portal. Maybe you've noticed a new trucking line in the city?"

"Two Way," I said automatically. I had seen the green trucks trundling north and south all summer. "Wait, that's a fae operation?"

"The portals, and our ability to go between them, have not only established ours as the most influential kingdoms, but they've also engendered us with a responsibility to safeguard the greater realm. We have to move food, supplies, and forces when and where they're needed, and often quickly."

"Fine, but why are you telling me all of this?" I asked irritably. Her explanation of our night together had left me feeling like a cheap toy played with briefly and then tossed away. And now here she was, giving me a geography lesson on the fae realm as if I was one of her students. I wanted to go home and punch something.

Instead, I used my fists to wipe the sting of sweat from my eyes. I noticed that Caroline's skin remained dry, as though wrapped in its own cool atmosphere. The oscillating fan shuddered another circuit.

"The portals have two sides," she said. "And though the fae are quiet about it, they are in constant negotiations with city officials to grant them exclusive access to the portals on this side."

"By *negotiations* do you mean bribes?"

"When they must."

I thought about the fae townhouse on the Upper East Side, the one I'd tried to force my way into in the spring. I had detoured past it a few times since, in the hopes of catching Caroline coming or going. That must have held the portal to Angelus's kingdom. The portal to Caroline's mother's kingdom would be somewhere in lower Manhattan.

"Ours is beneath Federal Hall," Caroline said with a tired laugh, as though picking up my thought. "You can imagine the kinds of strings the fae have had to pull over the years."

I grunted.

A stone's throw from Wall Street, Federal Hall stood on the site of the first capitol of the United States, where George Washington himself had been sworn into office. The building had been a national monument until about a decade ago when the city wrested it under municipal control—and then promptly shut the site down for repairs. Probably the fae's doing.

"I still don't see what this has to do with me," I said.

"Because of my connections to City Hall, I've been in talks with Mayor Lowder. He's—"

"Wait, you're talking to Budge? Even as he's planning to wipe us out?"

"He's not planning to wipe us out. Just listen," she said when I

started to interrupt again. “Budge saw you and me together at the gala that night back in April. He’s told me about your confrontation in his mansion. I’ve assured him that you’re not a threat, that you’ll be no further trouble to him.”

That damned professorial tone again. Indignation broke hot inside me.

“Thanks, but I can fight my own battles.”

“Not if Penny wakes up,” Caroline said.

“What do you mean?”

“Budge isn’t sure he can control her.”

“We already took care of that,” I said.

“If you’re talking about the information you have on them … Look, Budge covered his bases well. The sympathy campaign protects his wife while she’s comatose. Reveal anything about her werewolf nature now, and the public will eat you alive. That goes double when the eradication program gains momentum. The public will see it as a slander campaign. Meaning if and when Penny wakes up, she’ll have carte blanche to go after you.”

I had already been down that line of reasoning, but I refused to show any more weakness. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it,” I said.

“For your safety,” Caroline went on, “I think you should come to the faerie realm for a period, as our guest.”

“*Our*, as in your and Angelus’s?” I shook my head. “Forget it.”

“Just until we can assess the situation, see where the eradication program leads. The fae don’t typically intervene on behalf of non-fae, but I’ve worked out an exception for you.”

I waved my hands for her to stop.

“You’re welcome to bring your cat, of course,” she said.

“Look, Caroline. I get that you feel bad about what happened between us, that you want to try to make it up to me. But I’m not a charity case. I can take care of myself.”

“Not against the kinds of forces that might be gathering.”

The gravity in her voice matched the weight of her gaze: whatever it was she wasn’t telling me. I wanted to press her, but my pride wouldn’t allow it. I stood from behind my desk.

“Thanks for stopping by,” I said.

“Everson…”

I strode to the classroom door and opened it. After a moment, she rose and walked toward me. “At least promise me you’ll think about it. You still have my number. Leave me a message.”

“I left several back in April,” I said coldly.

She made a tentative move to hug me, but I backed away a step and stared at a spot just above her head. After a moment, Caroline

relented and walked out of my classroom and most likely my life.

Good riddance.

"My ice bags are all soggy," Tabitha pouted as I hung my cane on the coat rack and locked the apartment door behind me.

I looked over at where my cat lounged on her divan, a box fan blowing orange hair from her squinting eyes. Her perch was a cooling system I had fixed up for her: a plus-sized cat bed set atop gallon bags of ice. The bags were water-filled now, one fallen to the floor and leaking.

"Yeah, yeah," I sighed. "Hop up, and I'll change them."

"This heat is *insufferable*," she complained as she stood from the cat bed and stretched. "Can't you do anything about it?"

"I told you, we're on a waiting list with the HVAC people."

She stopped and eyed my approach. "You look like walking death."

"Just a tough morning at the college."

"Oh sure," she said. "Telling stories to an audience of impressionable young women, mooning and batting their lashes up at you. Must be fucking torture."

"It has nothing to do with my classes, and watch your mouth." I picked up the dripping bags and carried them to the kitchen sink.

"Do tell."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

I could feel her sharp feline eyes on me as I emptied the bags and scooped fresh ice into them. The heat wave coupled with a dead air conditioner had made Tabitha more antagonistic than usual. She was looking for an opening to needle me. I wasn't going to give her one.

"Well, if you don't tell me what's wrong," she said, "how am I going to help you?"

"*You* help *me?*" I laughed once. "That's rich."

I returned with the ice bags and a fresh towel, arranging them beneath her cat bed. I used the old towel to wipe up the spill on the floor.

"Oh, come now, darling," she said in her hurt voice, curling onto the bed, ice crunching as she shifted her weight around. "I know I don't always show it, but it just kills me when something's bothering you."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious. Besides, who else do you have to talk to?"

She had a point. With no one to confide in, my encounter with Caroline was only going to play a numb loop in my mind. A part of me felt a cold satisfaction at having shown Caroline the door, but the

heart-piercing truth was that she had walked out of it a long time ago. The four months since our night together would have been roughly two years in the faerie realm. Enough time for Caroline to settle into her marriage, her new life.

"Fine," I said, aiming a finger at Tabitha. "But the second you say something catty, this conversation's over."

She widened her ochre-green eyes as though to say *moi?*

I sighed and lowered myself to the couch. "Caroline stopped by my classroom today."

Tabitha grinned at the delicious tidbit, but to her credit, she kept her mouth shut.

"She claimed she came to apologize," I continued, "and to explain what happened, you know, that night."

"Oh, I know *all* about that night," Tabitha purred, damned feline hearing.

"I mean, I see where she's coming from." I stood and began pacing. "She agreed to marry Angelus to save her father, which is admirable. It is. And her new role carries all kinds of responsibilities, not just to her—" I had to swallow hard before I could form the word. "—*husband*, but to that realm. Responsibilities that, believe me, I understand. But I felt something that night in the way we moved, in the way our magic melded. Something that…"

"Doesn't happen with just any old gal?" Tabitha asked.

She had one eyebrow arched, but not in sarcasm. It was an honest question. I considered it before collapsing back onto the couch and digging my hands into my sweat-dampened hair.

"Yes," I said.

Tabitha nodded in what appeared honest understanding. That had to be a first.

"And when we were talking today," I went on, "I kept getting this feeling that she was holding back. That there was something she wasn't telling me."

"Such as?"

"I don't know."

Tabitha appeared to be thinking as she licked a paw and combed it over an ear. "Well, if you sensed as much, I'm sure the reason will emerge eventually. Will you have occasion to see each other again?"

I stared at Tabitha a moment to make sure she wasn't mocking me before shaking my head. "Our meeting didn't end well. Though I do have a standing invitation to the faerie realm. Woop-de-doo."

"And what's the occasion?"

"Oh, earlier today the mayor announced a plan to eradicate supernaturals. We're all right as long as his wife remains comatose, but if she wakes up, Caroline thinks all bets could be off."

Tabitha scowled. “By *wife* do you mean that werewolf? I do wish you would have killed her. I never have gotten on with their kind, and living inside a cat’s body doesn’t exactly improve things.”

“Half werewolf,” I corrected her. “And yeah, I’m starting to wish I would’ve finished her off, too. Which reminds me, any sightings today?”

Since my encounter with Penny and her pack, I’d asked Tabitha to be extra vigilant for werewolves. Budge may not have issued a sic-’em order, but the pack was no doubt burning to avenge the attack on their leader and fellow pack members. After four months, nothing, but I wasn’t about to let my guard down. Especially after the day’s developments.

“No, darling, but let’s not get off topic,” she replied, no doubt to steer the conversation from the tours she hadn’t carried out. “How did you reply to Caroline’s invitation?”

“I told her no, of course.”

Tabitha’s lower lip pouted out. “But their realm is rumored to have the most *divine* delectables. Markets of plump, fresh-caught fish—not the farm-raised trash you buy. Succulent lamb. Goat’s milk so rich it separates into a layer of cream thick enough to eat off the top.” Tabitha’s eyelids fluttered at the imagined foods. “It would be so wonderful, darling.”

“Well, too bad,” I said, “because I’m not going to hang around eating … *goat yogurt* while Caroline plays princess with Angelus.”

Tabitha *tsk*ed as she shook her head.

“What?” I said.

“You clearly don’t understand women. Don’t you see? Caroline is using the excuse of some ill-defined danger to bring you into her world, to be closer to you. It’s an age-old trick.”

Hope flickered inside me. “Really?”

Tabitha darted out her tongue, too late to catch the trickle of saliva dribbling off her chin. I sighed. Her counsel no longer had anything to do with Caroline. She was thinking about the faerie food.

“All right,” I said, slapping my thighs, “we’re done here.”

Tabitha returned from the fantasy, eyes sharpening. “Won’t you even consider the offer?”

“No.” I stood and retrieved my cane from the coat rack.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

“To learn about my mother.”

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6

Though the sun had just set, the dimming West Village streets continued to radiate late July heat. I hurried down the steps to Lady Bastet's basement-level business—minutes from learning the fate of my mother—only to find the door locked.

I knocked, waited, and then knocked again, harder.

Still no answer. *Must have stepped out.*

I was debating whether to wait for her, assuming she would even be back tonight, when something scratched the other side of the door. A cat's cry followed, the tenor low and strained. Something about it set off an inner alarm. I drew my sword and aimed it at the lock.

"Vigore!" Energy coursed down the blade. The lock trembled and burst. When I pushed the door open, something lithe and black and wearing an odd collar darted past me and up the steps. *Crap.* I was preparing to retrieve Lady Bastet's escaped cat, when I picked up a familiar scent.

Blood.

I threw myself against the brick wall beside the door. Using my sword blade, I tested the threshold. The protective glyphs were down. Either Lady Bastet had inactivated them, or a powerful presence had broken through. In readiness for the latter, I summoned a shield of light.

I peeked around the corner—no one inside—and eased into the main room. The lights had been left on. Ahead, one of Lady Bastet's cats lay on its side, partly hidden behind a colorful hanging rug. In two more steps, I saw that the body was headless, blood pooling near the neck.

"Oh, Jesus," I whispered, bringing the back of a hand to my mouth.

More cats littered the floor, all decapitated by a ripping force, hair everywhere. One severed head seemed to be watching me, the mouth opened in a frozen cry. I cut my gaze to the back room. From my angle, I could see a slice of the stone table and the shadow of someone sitting at it.

Heart slamming, I eased toward the room at an oblique angle, sword and staff at the ready. I peeked around the doorway and froze.

No.

Lady Bastet was slouched back in her chair, eyes wide but not from entrancement. I entered the room. Spilled blood wrapped her neck like a wine-red cravat. I stepped closer, my breath stuck in my chest. Someone or something had slit the mystic's throat.

"Lady Bastet?" I whispered.

No answer.

My eyes fell from her bloodstained peasant's blouse to her wrists and ankles. No bindings. No signs of struggle. The gold band in her hair hadn't even shifted—which didn't make any goddamned sense, not for someone so powerful. Had she been caught deep in spell work?

Beyond my crackling shield, I took in the overturned shelves, shattered spell items, and scattered cat parts. The scene had the markings of a werewolf attack. Penny *had* been planning to order wolves here to find her daughter, but that had been before I'd put Penny in a coma. Had the mayor ordered the attack? Or was I looking at some kind of rogue event?

I circled the room, opening my wizard's senses. Lingering energy showed in fading, multicolored hues. The energy appeared to have originated from Lady Bastet in the course of her divination work. Magic-wise, I wasn't picking up anything foreign, or even violent.

I dispersed my shield with a sigh and drew a dog-eared business card from my wallet. I flicked it with my thumb a few times before nodding.

"DID YOU TOUCH ANYTHING?" Detective Vega demanded.

Beneath midnight hair that had been stretched back into a ponytail, her professional eyes assessed the scene. She hadn't been happy to hear my voice when I rang her from a payphone. To Vega's credit, though, she hadn't hung up. Now, she acted cold and clinical, as if we'd never worked together, never helped one another out. That stung in ways I hadn't expected.

"Touch anything?" I echoed. "No."

She stooped toward Lady Bastet and examined the neck wound. "You said the door was locked when you got here?"

"Bolted. But her defenses were down."

Detective Vega seemed to ignore my last remark as she moved around the room, careful not to step on anything. "What were you doing here?" The question bordered on an accusation.

"I asked Lady Bastet to perform a reading on something I dropped off earlier today." As I spoke, Vega continued to survey the scene. "I was returning to see if she'd finished with it."

"What was the item?"

"A strand of my mother's hair."

Vega mumbled something about crime scene contamination, but she shifted her line of questioning. "And she was sitting here like this when you arrived?" she asked, standing to one side of Lady Bastet. "You didn't pick her up off the floor or straighten her or anything?"

"No."

"When you dropped off the hair earlier, did you come into this room?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell if anything's missing?"

I looked around the trashed room. Was she serious? "Listen," I said, stepping toward her and lowering my voice, even though we were alone. "Those werewolves we fought at the mayor's mansion? I think they're the ones who did this. Penny and her husband knew Lady Bastet put Penny's daughter in someone's care, but they don't know whose. This could've been—"

Vega shook her head irritably. "Just answer the question."

I gathered my nerve. If there was a time to have it out, it was now.

"For what it's worth, there's not a day that passes that I don't regret what I did," I said, "that I don't think about the danger I put your son in. So here it is again: I'm sorry. I really am. But can we set that aside for right now?" I cut my eyes toward Lady Bastet. "There's a good chance we're looking at the work of wolves. Which puts us in danger too."

Vega faced me, hands bracing her hips. "This is an official investigation, under the jurisdiction of the NYPD." Her eyes bored into mine. "Other than the fact you were the first witness to the scene, there's no *we*. Got it? Now, can you tell if anything's missing or not?"

There was no compromise on her face. I blew out an exasperated breath as I turned from Vega to the table. The scrying globe was in front of Lady Bastet, the covering cloth folded neatly to one side. I scanned the table's stone surface for my mother's hair. Not there or on the floor around the table. My eyes ranged across the room's wreckage once more.

"Nothing obvious," I said.

"Holy *shit*," someone exclaimed from the main room, no doubt finding the dead cats.

I turned as the person scuffed toward us, his body soon filling the doorway—its width, anyway. When he saw me, he scrunched up his face like someone had punched him in the nose. I squinted back in disbelief.

"Hoffman?" I said. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

"It's *Detective* Hoffman," he answered. "And I could ask you the

same. Thought we eighty-sixed your contract."

I turned to Vega. "But he was selling info to Moretti!"

"Yeah, or maybe I was setting him up," Hoffman shot back. "Ever think of that, smartass?"

By Vega's narrowing eyes, I guessed that she had reported her partner only to see him slapped on the wrist and sent back to work. It was tough times for the department—personnel cuts, waning public trust. The last thing they could afford was another investigation into police corruption.

"Is the door secured?" Vega asked him.

Hoffman gave me a final scowl. "Yeah, got a couple of uniforms out front. What's going on?" He looked down at Lady Bastet and grinned around the gum he was smacking. "Someone get upset over his fortune?"

Vega observed my balling fists and stepped between us. "We'll call if we have any more questions."

I continued to glare at Hoffman, who ambled around the scene, still wearing that stupid smacking smile. Vega's words only sank in when I'd forced a calming breath. "Wait, that's it?" I asked her.

"You're dismissed," she affirmed.

I made sure Hoffman was out of earshot before lowering my voice. "Look, I think we need to collaborate on this one. Find out if it really *is* the work of wolves and, if so, what they're up to."

"I said you're dismissed."

"Allow me to translate." Hoffman sauntered up behind her and jerked his thumb toward the door. "Take a hike, jackass."

I searched Vega's face for any sign that she might want to tell me something away from her partner. But her visage remained hard, hostile. Could she still be that angry with me?

"Fine," I said, "but if you have any questions—"

"I already said we'd call you." Vega turned away.

When Hoffman did the same, I unsheathed my sword and flicked my wrist. The path of the blade cut just behind Hoffman's left ear. I caught the tuft of hair that fell from his curly brown wreath.

Might come in handy.

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7

It was full dusk when I reached the sidewalk. Headlights swam up and down the street as my cane tapped a hollow rhythm beside me. I needed to be back there, helping with the investigation. I needed to be doing *something*, dammit.

But Vega wouldn't allow it.

I racked my brain for a spell I could cast, one that would point to the killer. But lacking a target item, I came up blank. Did I even need a spell? I wondered. The crime scene had Penny's wolves written all over it. That filled in the who. But ignoring the why for a moment, how would they have breached Lady Bastet's defenses? How would they have overpowered her?

"Mr. Croft," a deep voice called.

I peeked back. The broad-shouldered man was mostly in silhouette, but I could make out the dull glint of a badge, and it wasn't NYPD. Shit. Penny's pack worked in government security, and there wasn't a chance in hell this man appearing on the heels of Lady Bastet's murder was a coincidence. I lifted my shirt away from the revolver holstered above my hip. For the last four months, I hadn't left home without it, a silver bullet in each cylinder.

"Mr. Croft," he called again, walking faster. "Need to have a word with you."

"I don't know any Mr. Croft," I called back. "You've got the wrong person."

My heart thumped as I moved my cane to my front and readied a shield invocation. I could probably take him, but I wanted to reach the next intersection, where traffic was flashing past. The wolf would be less likely to shift in the open, giving me an advantage.

He wasn't going to let me get there, though. The man bounded past and wheeled, a feral light burning in his eyes.

"Protezione!" I called, throwing a shield of light between us and drawing the revolver.

He tilted his nose up and sniffed the air. "Yeah, it's him," he called past me.

Huh?

I was halfway into my turn when a blow from a second wolf

crushed the side of my head. My legs jiggled for a moment, and I fell to the street, revolver tumbling from my grip as my failed shield rained over me.

VOICES, low and murky, seeped into my hearing. I squinted my eyes open. I was sitting in a padded chair in a small room. A warehouse office, judging by the corrugated metal and piles of old file boxes. Moths batted around a dangling bulb, some as large as sparrows. When one fluttered too close to my face, I tried to swat it away, but my arm wouldn't budge.

Head throbbing, I looked down at my wrists. Plastic zip ties secured them to the armrests. A second pair bound my ankles to the chair's legs.

Well, shit, I thought groggily.

I listened to the voices. I couldn't make out words, but they were coming from beyond the office door. Men's voices. Two sets. Probably the werewolves who had ambushed me. Meaning if I didn't want to end up like Lady Bastet, I needed to get the hell out of here.

And without making a lot of noise.

My cane was nowhere in sight, my coin pendant absent from my neck. I trained my attention inward, to my casting prism, and found it fractured and wrapped in fog. When I tried a centering mantra to restore it, my lips wouldn't separate. A strip of tape held them closed.

Great, someone knows who they're dealing with.

After attempting to create a pocket inside the tape using my tongue, I gave up and studied the chair's armrests. The foam padding around the right one had disintegrated down to a hard edge of metal. Sharp enough to cut through the plastic restraint? I moved my right arm back and forth in a minute sawing motion, a few millimeters each way, all the restraint would allow.

The voices drew nearer, their owners now casting shadows against the doorframe.

Crap crap crap crap.

I relaxed my arm as the werewolf I'd met in the alleyway entered, still in human form. He had dark red hair and arms the size of my thighs, though better sculpted. He was followed by a second hulking werewolf, no doubt the one who had smashed me in the head. They looked like brothers, especially in their matching security guard uniforms. I took an immediate dislike to both of them.

"Sleep well?" Brother One asked, smirking as he adjusted the belt holding his service weapon.

"He's up," Brother Two called to someone behind them.

I had been puzzling over who had ordered Lady Bastet's murder. Now I had a gut-wringing feeling I was about to find out.

"What's this?" a man's voice demanded. Between the brothers' shoulders, I caught a flash of lenses. A moment later, a pudgy figure shoved his way past the wolves. "Is he alive?"

It was Mayor Lowder.

Sorry to break it to you, sweetie, I thought to an imagined Caroline. *But contrary to your assurances, I'm not only a target of the mayor's eradication program, but part of phase one testing.*

"He didn't cooperate," Brother One said.

"Did he attack you?" Budge asked.

"He pointed a Smith and Wesson at him," the wolf replied, nodding at his brother, "packed with silver."

"We confiscated it," Brother Two said with a grin. "Then ran it over."

The revolver had cost me a small fortune, but its condition was the least of my worries at the moment.

Budge stopped in front of me, hands on the hips of his baggy trousers. He studied the right side of my face, the side that had absorbed the brunt of my fall. It felt stiff with blood. Budge sighed and looked over the rest of me. "Well, untie him, for God's sake. He looks like an Italian sausage."

Not the next words I'd been expecting.

The wolves looked at one another before stalking forward, fierce yellow nails emerging from the ends of their fingers. The same nails that had sliced Lady Bastet's throat?

They wedged their nails under the restraints and ripped away the plastic ties. Within seconds, I was free—but not free from danger. The wolves loomed over me, hatred shining in their flaming irises. I was the killer of their brethren, after all, maimer of their leader.

I leaned back as Brother One reached for my face. With a flick, he snagged a corner of the tape and tore the whole thing from my mouth. I licked lips that felt raw and swollen.

"Don't just stand there, Flint," Budge snapped. "Go get him a drink."

"A drink?" Flint asked.

"There's an old vending machine around back," Budge said. "See if there's anything left inside. You too, Evan."

The two wolves growled down at me before pacing away.

"You'll have to forgive them." Budge dragged another office chair from the side of the room and sat on the front edge of the seat. "Big dummies. I just wanted them to pick you up so we could chat."

"In a warehouse?" I asked skeptically.

"Yeah, well, this is sort of off the record. I couldn't have you

coming to City Hall. Not without upsetting the rest of the pack." He dipped his head so he could see my downcast face better. "Hey, I really am sorry about the rough treatment. You gonna be all right?"

Though the mayor was playing Mr. Nice Guy, I knew his game. He wanted to extract some sort of information before giving the kill order. Like he'd no doubt done with Lady Bastet.

"What do you want to talk about?"

Budge leaned to one side as though taking his measure of me. "Look, I'm not gonna bullshit you, Everson. I've got a list of reasons to want you gone, the top one being that you damned near killed my wife."

"Well, you damned near killed me. Makes us even, right?"

Budge smiled. "I have a private firing range I go to every Saturday, ten a.m. Over two hundred rounds a visit. Been doing that for at least twenty years now. I'm a damned good shot from fifty. You were about, what, twenty feet away when I pulled the trigger that morning? What I'm saying is that if I'd been shooting to kill, you'd be worm food right now."

A ghost pain throbbed in my right chest where the bullet had entered. I touched a hand to the spot and gauged Budge's distance. He was close enough that I could reach him before he drew a gun, pound him to the floor. The problem would be the wolves. With their preternatural senses, they would hear the commotion. I was in no condition to outrace them—and without my sword, gun, or magic, in even less condition to fight them.

"The truth is, Everson, I like you," the mayor went on. "No, I'm serious. You helped my stepdaughter, and you seem like a genuinely decent person. Plus, you've got some good people out there vouching for you."

Caroline, I thought with mixed emotions.

"I also happen to know you do a lot of good work for the city." He tipped me a conspiratorial wink. I stiffened when I realized he was referring to my duties with the Order: banishing nether creatures, closing their portals to our world. But who in the hell could have told him about that? Not even Caroline knew the extent of my work. We hadn't gotten that far.

"It's all right," he said, showing a hand. "Your secret's safe."

The wolves returned, Flint holding a green can. He was slightly bigger than his brother, and I pegged him as the older one. "There was only one drink left in the machine," Flint said, "diet ginger ale."

"Fine, fine." Budge took the soda and shooed the wolves back out of the office. "Here." He cracked the tab and handed the can to me.

The aluminum was hot in my grip, and the ginger ale went down warm, but I was too thirsty to care. Who knew how long I'd been

conked out and pouring sweat before the mayor showed up? I drank down half the ginger ale, then lowered the can to my knee and burped.

"Better?" Budge asked, in a concerned voice.

"I would be if I knew what the hell you wanted."

"I'm getting to that."

I couldn't stand the dancing around anymore. "Did you know Lady Bastet was killed earlier today?" I said.

"The mystic in the Village?" The mayor's face scrunched up as he loosened his tie and used his collar to fan his neck. "She was the one who changed my stepdaughter back, right?"

I nodded slowly. I was usually good at reading false emotions on a person's face, but the mayor appeared surprised by the news, saddened even. Maybe a group of Penny's wolves *had* gone rogue.

"Any suspects?" Budge asked.

"None that I know of," I answered carefully.

"Damned shame." Sullenly, Budge wiped his brow with a forearm. "Too much of that sort of thing happening in the city. I'm not sure if you caught my press conference earlier today."

"I did," I replied. "Round up the supernaturals, throw them in an oven, save the city."

The mayor gave an embarrassed chuckle. "Well, those kinds of announcements are always one part policy, two parts theater." His mouth straightened as he rested his forearms on his knees. "The truth is, the problem is much more complex than that. Not only because my wife is, well, a supernatural, but because there are genuinely good supernaturals in this city. The diviner I consult in Chinatown, for example. Lady Bastet. The fae. *You.* Don't worry, Everson. I know that about my city. For the eradication program I'm proposing, I want to target the bad ones. The worst of the worst. The goddamned ghouls in the subway lines. The creatures making a bone yard of Central Park. Those are the ones I want gone."

I squinted at Budge, trying to figure out his angle. He was in a mayoral race that, by all rights, his opponent should have been running away with. That Budge was even close was owed to his wife's condition. But sympathy was only going to carry him so far. Enter the eradication program—or at least an expedited operation or two that would show dramatic results.

"All so you can announce 'mission accomplished' in October," I said, "sweeping you to victory in November?"

Budge grimaced before breaking into a you-got-me smile. "I have to keep reminding myself that you're a college professor, not one of my typical voters. Yeah," he conceded, "you're more or less in the ballpark. Which means I have three months to do what I announced.

Not much time at all."

I studied his imploring gaze.

"Look," he said, "the federal government spotted me an advance, so the team I'm putting together is ace. But most of them are new to this supernatural thing. You know the ins and outs. Hell, I've seen you in action. You're good. Damned good. Plus, you've advised the NYPD before. It's just a matter of renewing your contract."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The man didn't want me dead. He wanted my help. I thought about Caroline's warning before answering. "What would your wife say?" I asked.

Budged looked toward the door and lowered his voice. "What *can* she say? By the time she awakens, the program will have wrapped up. I'll be in my second term, and I'll have you in part to thank. We both will."

"You sure about that?"

He nodded, his eyes moving back and forth over mine. In exchange for helping him, he was offering a kind of amnesty. No more looking over my shoulder to see whether Penny's pack was stalking me.

"Are any wolves going to be involved?"

"God, no," Budge replied, keeping his voice low. "Just NYPD officers and specialists."

"Detective Vega," I said.

Budge's brow furrowed in question. "What about her?"

I was considering what Caroline had said about how the information Vega and I wielded over the mayor and his wife would no longer be a deterrent. "I want the same deal for her."

Budge's face smoothed. "Already done."

"And there has to be discretion. I don't want every New Yorker and their grandmother knowing what I can do."

"Hey, mum's the word." His eyebrows rose above his glasses. "So?"

Even with my throbbing headache, the calculation was a simple one. Whether or not Budge *could* control his wife were she to awaken, I would be safer inside the eradication program than outside of it.

"I'll have to clear it with my higher ups," I said. "But as far as I'm concerned, yeah, I'm on board."

Budge's face lit up as he slapped my knee.

"Attaboy!"

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I plodded up the final steps of my apartment building, cane and necklace back in my possession, casting prism restored, and reviewed the deal I'd made with Budge. If nothing else, it offered Vega and me another layer of protection. The only question was how robust that protection would be. I didn't know how much control Budge wielded over Penny's pack.

I unlocked the three door bolts and prioritized my next moves. First, heal up. Second, contact the Order about my participating in the eradication program. And third, start figuring out why the wolves had murdered Lady Bastet. That would tell me what kind of danger Vega and I might be in.

The apartment was dark when I entered. I was reaching for the light switch when, from the direction of Tabitha's divan, came a strangled moan. I stopped and yanked my sword from my cane, the bloody image of the decapitated cats searing through my mind's eye.

"Tabitha?" I called.

A pair of eyes flashed from the divan—but not the ochre-green of my cat's. These were yellow.

"Protezione!" I called.

Sparks burst from my orb as it manifested a shield of white light. In the sudden glow, the being on Tabitha's divan took shape. Not a wolf, though. A squat man in a corduroy sports jacket with elbow patches was sitting there, the pointed toes of his green leather shoes just touching the floor. Beneath a mop of gray hair, the man's eyes squinted back at me.

"Chicory?" I said.

The last time I'd seen my mentor had been ten months earlier, when he'd rescued me from a group of druids in Central Park and then forbade me from pursuing the demon cases. I dissolved my shield with another Word and hit the flood lights. Chicory lowered his hand from his brow.

"At ease," he said in his Irish brogue.

Tabitha was on his far side, purring and moaning as Chicory scratched the hair around her ears. They had always gotten along well, despite my mentor's disapproval of her succubus nature.

I sheathed my sword. “You scared all hell out of me.”

“Ah, yes, I let myself in,” Chicory said. “I hope you don’t mind. I’d almost forgotten about your companion. She’s quite a beautiful thing, isn’t she? Though a little starved for attention, I should say.”

I watched Tabitha moan and twist her neck as Chicory scratched around it.

“Not anymore,” I muttered, walking toward them.

I searched my mentor’s face, with its bushy brows, squash-shaped nose, and curmudgeon’s lips, for some indication of why he’d come. His visits rarely heralded good things.

“So, what’s up?” I asked.

Chicory gave Tabitha’s head a final pat. “There you are, love.” He wiped his hands together and stood to face me. Behind him, Tabitha curled onto her cat bed and passed out.

“Did you summon a gatekeeper from the In Between?” he asked pointedly.

Crap. “Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say *summon*. I had a brief chat with one, if that’s what you’re getting at. Emphasis on brief.”

“And what did he say?” Chicory asked.

“Not much, to be honest.”

“They rarely do, unless it’s in the act of claiming your soul.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not careless enough to let *that* happen,” I said, recalling the sensation of dangling into the frigid void, my fingers clenching the mirror frame.

Chicory let out a *humpf* as he lowered himself to my reading chair. “You know the Order’s policy on summonings.”

“I told you, it wasn’t a summoning. It was more of a … leaving the back door open. I didn’t force the gatekeeper to come through.”

Chicory’s eyebrows crowded his dark eyes. He wasn’t buying it.

“Look,” I said, “I was just trying to find out some information on my mother. I went to the Order first, I’ll have you know.”

“Then you should have awaited their response.”

“Oh, yeah? And when would that have been? The next fossil age?”

“Everson,” he said sternly, “I needn’t remind you that there are penalties for wayward wizards.”

“No, you *needn’t*.” I sat on the couch with a hard sigh. “I just find it funny that whenever I ask for a hand, the Order seems to fall off the face of the Earth, but when I commit a minor infraction—bam!—you’re suddenly up in my face.”

“You shouldn’t expect your priorities and the Elders’ to align. But preventing wizards from turning to the dark arts is a priority we all share. There’s a reason there’s only been one rebellion against the Order in its centuries of existence.”

“Rebellion?” I said, sitting upright. “I’ve never heard anything

about a rebellion."

Chicory, who had been pulling a smoking pipe from his jacket, paused to frown, as though he'd let something slip. He regarded the bowl of packed leaves for a moment before nodding. "That's not a story we tell our novice practitioners, but perhaps it's time you heard it."

I bristled at the word *novice* before reminding myself that, though I'd been wizarding for more than a decade, I remained an infant in the eyes of those who'd been practicing for hundreds, even thousands, of years.

Chicory drew his wand from another pocket, touched it to the pipe, and puffed until the leaves began to crackle. When he moved the stem from his lips, a sweet fragrance of tobacco drifted over the room. "The First Saint from whom we're all descended had nine children," he began.

"I already know that part of the history."

"Are your own students this impertinent?" Chicory asked with a frown. "If you want me to tell you the story of the rebellion, I need to start at the beginning."

I showed a hand to say *fair enough* and nodded for him to continue.

He took two quick puffs. "Now, the Order began informally, as you know. A way for Michael's nine children to train their own children in the art of magic, battling dark creatures, so on and so forth."

"Sort of like community homeschooling," I said.

"Very much so," Chicory decided after a moment's pause. "But like with any growing organization, as the practitioners multiplied and spread around the ancient world, the training became more formalized. Michael's children called themselves the First Order. They appointed regional heads, whom they called the Second Order. Later Third and Fourth Orders were added. Decisions made by the First Order were disseminated down the ranks. Over time, the Diaspora came to be known as the Order of Magi and Magical Beings."

This was still a review from my training under Lazlo, but I didn't say anything.

"Now," Chicory continued, "around the time of the late Roman Empire, the First Order attained a level of magic that transformed them. Some would say they became gods or at least god-*like*. Though they continued to exist on the physical plane, they inhabited more ethereal planes as well."

"The Elders," I said, scooting forward. Though I *had* heard all of this before, the thought of attaining that state—as indeed I might one day (if I managed to stay alive)—fascinated me.

"Precisely," Chicory said, the smoke that rose from his pipe seeming to bend reality. He aimed the stem at me. "Now here's what

you *weren't* told. Of the original members of the First Order, only eight attained that godlike state. No one can say why the youngest did not."

"Runt of the litter?"

Chicory shrugged. "Perhaps he didn't inherit as much power from his father as the others. But it wasn't for lack of practice. This ninth sibling was intent on perfecting his magic, of transforming that art into science. Indeed, Lich—for that was his name—Lich devised the regimen for fledgling magic-users, penned many of the world's first spell books. You might imagine his disappointment, then, when his siblings ascended and he was left behind."

I caught myself nodding.

"But Lich was determined to join them," Chicory continued. "The legend goes that he practiced more fervently than he ever had before, the effort nearly killing him, until one day, after hundreds of years, his efforts opened a deep, deep fissure in the fabric of our world. Through it, he heard the whisperings of a being more ancient than the First Saints and Demons."

I leaned further forward, the rest of my apartment seeming to disappear.

Chicory nodded gravely. "By eavesdropping on the being's whisperings, Lich learned secrets that could elevate him to the level of his siblings and possibly beyond. From those secrets, he cultivated power. And with that power, he confronted his eight brothers and sisters, demanding his rightful place among them. They questioned the source of his magic. When he told them, they attempted to close the fissure to the Deep Down. Lich fought back."

"What happened?"

"A horrible battle. Indeed, the Order almost fell. But in the end, they destroyed Lich and sealed the opening to the domicile of the being who came to be known as the Whisperer."

I had always considered the Elders invincible. To hear that they'd been pushed to the brink sent a guilty jolt of pleasure through me while filling me with a deeper anxiety. "The Order almost fell?"

"The Elders took steps to ensure nothing like that would ever happen again." Chicory leveled his gaze at me. "*Including* creating a penalty system for wizards who insist on summoning beings they shouldn't."

"I told you, it wasn't really a summon—"

"Silence, Everson."

I watched him watching me, the smoke from his pipe enshrouding him in a sinister mist. Story time was over. Time to dole out the punishment. A heavy stone rolled around my stomach. Chicory set his pipe on an end table and folded his stubby fingers over his small paunch.

“Though you committed an infraction, that’s not why I came,” he said.

“It’s n-not?”

“I’m here on another errand. When I let myself in, I *happened* to sense the remnants of the summoning spell, which you’ve all but confessed to. There are penalties for such actions, Everson. But given that you banished a demon lord last fall, I’m only going to issue a warning this time. *This time*,” he emphasized, raising an eyebrow. “You’ll see no such leniency the next.”

“I understand,” I said, touching my clasped hands to my forehead. “Thank you.”

“I’m here about your mother.”

I lowered my hands.

“In response to your multiple inquiries into the circumstances surrounding your mother’s death, the Order has sent me to address them.”

“That’s why you’re here?”

“The answer, I’ve been told, is no.”

“No?” I said. “What do they mean *no*?”

“They have no more information for you.”

“They have no more information period, or no more information they want to tell me?”

“They hope this brings the matter to a close.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Brings the matter to a close? The hell it does! All it tells me is that the Order is hiding something.” I flattened my shaking hands against my thighs and took several deep breaths. “I’m going to ask you something, Chicory—*you*, not them—and I want the God’s honest truth.” I took another breath as I considered the question I’d been brooding over for the last four months. “Did the Order execute her?”

The room seemed to waver around us.

“I can tell you unequivocally that they did not.”

I took a moment to decide whether or not I believed him. Chicory waited, a sober honesty standing in his eyes.

“But there’s more,” I said. “There has to be more.”

“If there is, the Elders have chosen not to disclose it. We must accept whatever wisdom guides their reasoning.”

“But it’s my mother,” I said.

“I know, Everson.”

“Can you at least tell me whether she was a magic-user, a member of the Order?”

“She passed away before my transfer here,” Chicory said. “But I don’t think the Order would object to my telling you there’s no record on her. None that I could locate, anyway. Not every generation

manifests the power of Michael's lineage. While your mother carried the genes, the genes may not have found expression in her. They found expression in you, though—something the Order was unaware of until your adventures in Romania."

"Can you ask them?" I pressed.

Chicory sighed heavily.

"Please."

He move his head side to side as though deliberating. At last, he nodded. "I'll see what I can find out. But I can't tell you when to expect any information," he added hurriedly. "I have a full caseload right now."

"I understand. Anything's better than nothing."

"Very well." He stood and returned his pipe to his pocket. "Was there anything else?"

"Actually, the mayor is planning a program to eradicate ghouls and lesser creatures in the city. He wants me to act as a consultant. I told him I had to clear it with my higher ups." Not wanting to convolute the request, I said nothing about the werewolves or Lady Bastet's murder.

"That sounds fine," Chicory said. "It's why Michael sired children, after all. Just don't let it interfere with your other duties." Chicory shot me a final reproving look. "And no more summonings—or *leaving doors open*, as you call it. Not from the In Between, not from anywhere."

"No more leaving doors open," I agreed.

Chicory's cocked eyebrow issued all the warning I needed. Not only would I face extreme punishment, but I could forget about learning anything more about my mother.

"G'night, love," he said to Tabitha, giving her a final scratch behind the ears.

Tabitha shifted and purred in her sleep.

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9

I met with the mayor twice that week, official meetings in his City Hall office. No more being beaten and grabbed off the street. For Budge's part, he acted as if that episode had never happened. We spent most of the first meeting discussing the supernatural geography of the city, narrowing in on the ghoul-infested subway lines and the wilds of Central Park.

Budge frowned down at the map spread over his desk. "Which one should we nail first?"

"Well, if the goal is to get the most bang for your buck in the shortest amount of time…" I tapped the defunct Broadway line in lower Manhattan. "…I'd go after the ghouls. With them gone, murders and disappearances will drop immediately. A hard stat you can point to."

"I like the sound of that," Budge said.

"Not to mention you'll be able to restore service to that line, something the public's been clamoring for."

"Great minds think alike." Budge checked his watch. "I've got a meeting with the MTA boss in a couple minutes. Sort of a blow hard, but that's between you and me. In any case, let's sit down again tomorrow, same time. I want you to talk Captain Cole and me through the nuts and bolts."

We shook on it. As had been the case all meeting, I couldn't find an ulterior motive. The eradication program seemed to be just what Budge had said it would be: a high-profile injection of money and resources into the problem of marauding monsters. If the program produced the results Budge needed, he had a chance of eking out a win in November.

I spent the rest of that day in my library/lab. I gathered all of the information I could on ghouls, distilled the information down to its essence, and then devised a way to eradicate them en masse. I studied maps of the subway lines. I tested various defensive sigils and magical incendiaries. Satisfied, I typed out a plan and carried it to the mayor's office the next day.

Lance Cole, the man appointed to head the Hundred, was sitting in a chair facing the mayor's desk in his captain's uniform. He greeted

me with a nod that was hard to read amid the age lines creasing his dark face. As I went over my strategy with Budge, Cole sat back and listened.

When I finished, Budge turned to him. “What do you think?”

Captain Cole pressed the dark gemstone of a fraternal ring to his mustache and reread my proposal. When he reached the bottom of the page, he gave a single nod. “If you can cover the lights, and Everson here this part”—he brushed the bullet points with the pinky ring—“we can take care of the rest.”

“How soon?” Budge asked.

“I can have the team ready inside of a week,” Cole answered.

“How’s that sound, Everson?”

“Works for me.”

Budge beamed at both of us. “It’s why I hired the best.”

“Um, just one more thing,” I said. “I’d like to have Detective Hoffman from Homicide advising as well.”

Captain Cole’s forehead wrinkled. “We already have Detective Vega helping out.”

“Right, but Hoffman’s worked on supernatural cases too,” I said. “And he brings a different perspective.” Which was to say he remained a stubborn-ass skeptic about the supernatural despite any and all evidence to the contrary. But that’s not why I wanted him.

Cole appeared to chew on that for a moment before nodding. “Fine. I’m going to have you present your plan to the Hundred on Thursday. I’ll make sure both detectives are there.”

Excellent, I thought. *But it doesn’t give me much time.*

I STOPPED at a camera store on my way home. In the vintage section, I found and paid for an old Polaroid camera and several packs of film.

Back in my apartment lab I placed the tuft of hair I’d cut from Hoffman at the crime scene into my silver casting circle. On the floor beside it, I created a second, larger circle. Inside that one, I set a mound of wet, gray clay that I kept in a plastic garbage container. I then sprinkled the clay with black ash, grated mandrake root, and two tablespoons of my own blood.

Pulling a spell book from a shelf, I consulted a set of Coptic instructions. For spying, there was scrying, projecting, and summoning lesser beings. But I needed recorded evidence, and that meant animation. I winced at the memory of my last attempt, the result a screaming golem that had run around punching himself in the jewels before I force-blasted him out of existence. Clay had rained everywhere and taken me weeks to clean from my rugs.

Impure clay, I reminded myself, hoping that had been the reason for the masochistic display. I aimed my staff at the mound of high-grade clay and recited the incantation, careful to pronounce each syllable precisely.

"Vivere … pulsare … respirare … levarsi…"

Energy coursed through my mental prism. I pushed that energy, along with some of my own essence, into the clay. After a minute of nothing, the clay began to squelch and fold in on itself. The blood thinned into a network of vessels. Within moments, a shape became evident: a tadpole-like creature with large pods for eyes. It writhed and flopped on the floor, its shrinking tail soon replaced by sprouting legs. Arms pushed from beneath a head that was becoming less embryonic, more human. The eyes shrank and migrated inward until I was looking at an infant. The infant opened its mouth in a silent cry as it elongated, its C-shaped back becoming more lordotic. It was a boy. With growing limbs, the golem began pushing himself upright, tottering as dark hair sprouted from his molding head.

By the time the golem steadied and opened his hazel-colored eyes, I was at face level with a crude likeness of myself. I waited a moment, a force invocation on the tip of my tongue, but the animation didn't start screaming or swinging his fists. He only watched, waiting for my command.

"Dress," I said, spreading a pile of clothes at his feet.

The golem stared at the clothes before something took hold in his rudimentary mind. He reached for the plaid boxers first, stepping into them stiffly—left leg, then right—and pulling them up. Next he donned the socks in the same left-right order. It was how I dressed, which made sense, considering he was operating off a dimmer version of my own knowledge and memories.

He finished by putting on a necklace that featured a copper amulet, one I had infused with energy to sustain the being for the next several days. He even tucked it inside his shirt as I did with my own coin pendant.

"Ready to get to work?" I asked.

The golem regarded me with an expression not unlike a clothing store mannequin's.

"That's the spirit. But first we need a name for you. How does Ed sound?"

"Ed," he repeated in monotone.

"You like that, huh?" I chuckled and clapped his shoulder. "Well, I've got a job for you, Ed."

I trained my attention on the silver circle, where I'd set Hoffman's hair. Incanting, I drew the detective's essence into my staff and then directed the essence into Ed's amulet, turning it into a homing beacon.

I waved Ed over to where I had set the Polaroid camera on the end of the lab table.

I spoke slowly. “Load the camera with film and take my picture.”

Ed fumbled with the film’s metallic wrapping, eventually shedding it and slotting the film into the camera. I smiled broadly as the golem raised the Polaroid to his right eye and clicked. A white-framed photo emerged from the camera’s mouth.

“Good,” I said, pulling the photo free.

As the image of me developed, I considered what I was doing. In the last couple of days, I had begun to see the eradication program as an opportunity to not only protect myself, but to get close to the Lady Bastet investigation. I needed info on who was behind the hit and why. I also wanted to recover my mother’s final hair. Obtaining either from Vega would be next to impossible, but Hoffman was another story. Mr. Moretti had already proven the man could be bought. I had considered waving some cash under Hoffman’s nose, but blackmail felt like a surer bet.

Plus it was cheaper.

“All right,” I said to the golem, who had been facing me patiently. “You’re going to tail Hoffman for the next few days. Any time he meets with someone other than fellow NYPD, I want you to snap a picture. Above all, be discreet. If he spots you, run.” I handed him several folded-over twenties and watched him insert them into his pants pocket. “That will cover cab fares. You’ll stop back here once a day to drop off the pictures and pick up fresh film. When you feel the amulet’s energy running low, I want you to return here for good. Understand?”

The instructions were basic, intended to ensure we were on the same page. If I had performed the spell correctly, enough of my own intelligence now echoed inside Ed’s head to steer him.

“Understand,” he repeated in a blocky voice.

I looked my creation over once more. He was too clunky to appear fully human, but that was hardly a deal breaker in New York. I placed a Mets baseball cap on his head, pulling the bill low to cast a shadow over his face. Then, wheeling him around, I swatted his clay butt.

“Go get ’em, tiger.”

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10

I looked from my notes scattered over the lectern to the packed auditorium. The men and women sitting ramrod straight in dark blue uniforms had been selected from the NYPD's elite tactical teams, the best of the best. True to Mayor Lowder's word, they were all human. No werewolves. Even so, the Hundred was the most intimidating audience I had ever lectured to.

Sure ain't Midtown College, I mused, thinking of my six students.

I tapped my notes into a pile and, assuming a professorial air, leaned toward the mounted microphone. The sound system whined feedback until I remembered my wizarding aura and backed away.

"Good afternoon," I said.

The Hundred stared back with hard eyes and set jaws.

"Great. How about we dive right in?" I signaled to a technician. The lights dimmed, and everyone's eyes shifted to the digital screen behind me. I didn't need to turn to see the image of the gray monstrosity glaring back at them. I was pleased to catch a few winces.

"Ghouls," I began. "They range in height from six to eight feet tall and can weigh in excess of five hundred pounds. But don't let the size fool you. In addition to super strength, they're twice as fast as all of you here. Note the razor-sharp claws and canines … A ghoul's preferred diet is rotting flesh, but they'll take whatever they can find, living or dead. When they hunt, it's almost always in packs. For years they've gone after low-hanging fruit: drunks and junkies, mostly in the East Village and Lower East Side. But they've grown bolder in recent months, coming up earlier in the evening and venturing farther afield."

I had the technician advance to an image of a bloody crime scene on a narrow street.

"Two weeks ago, scraps of an NYU student were found on Bond Street. Friends say she was walking home after a late-night party. The entire process from pursuit to capture to devouring probably took the ghoul pack less than a minute. Even armed with a snub-nosed pistol, the young woman had no chance."

The audience eyed the image in rapt attention. I could feel their minds wrapping around the idea that they would be facing an

opponent most of them had dismissed as fiction until only recently. Captain Cole, who had introduced me minutes earlier, leaned against a wall to my right.

I signaled for the tech to skip ahead several screens. There were more crime-scene images, but I'd made my point.

"All right, so here's the defunct Broadway line and its east-west services," I said, turning toward the map of subway routes in lower Manhattan. "Most of the ghouls are concentrated inside that red box, south of Fourteenth Street and west of Brooklyn. A couple of hundred, probably."

"If these things even exist," someone asked, "what do you need a SWAT team for? Why not just gas the lines?"

I focused on the back row until I could see the speaker, one of two plainclothes cops in attendance. "If it were only that easy, Detective," I replied, suppressing a smile. Hoffman had come. "Ghouls can go for days without air, making them immune to the kinds of gases you have in mind. I should add that their regenerative abilities also make them immune to most weapons."

"So what does that leave?" he asked. "Kryptonite?"

"Sunlight and fire," I replied.

"Sunlight? In the tunnels?"

"Let the professor talk," Captain Cole said sternly.

Hoffman scowled and settled back in his chair. I slid my gaze over to Detective Vega, who was sitting beside him. She looked back with a sour expression, clearly irritated by my inclusion in the eradication program.

"Thank you," I said to Cole, lifting the long pointer I'd set against the lectern. "Sunlight won't kill a ghoul, but it does weaken them. We can't introduce actual sunlight into the tunnels, no. But full-spectrum, industrial-strength spotlights will do the job. Equipped with these spotlights, armed teams will drop into the lines here, here, and here." I tapped the map at three of the line's branches. "The teams will converge toward the Canal Street station, driving the ghouls out ahead of them. Lights will also be shone down through the vents to keep the ghouls from escaping up to street level. Once at the convergence point, we'll seal the station, trapping the creatures inside. We'll then ignite a powerful incendiary, transforming the station into a crematory. They'll be reduced to ashes within minutes."

My research had shown that ghouls could be killed one of two ways: decapitation or extensive brain trauma. Because the first was too labor intensive, not to mention dangerous, I had recommended to the mayor the second. The plan would mean considerable damage to the station, but Budge had reiterated his support. "Better property than people," he'd said.

“Are there any questions for the professor?” Captain Cole asked now.

A burly woman raised her hand. “Are we sure the spotlights will be effective? What’s to stop the ghouls from turning around and attacking them?”

“In a word,” I said, “cowardice.” I had the tech return to the image of the creature. “Appearances to the contrary, ghouls are pretty gutless. It’s why they prefer scavenging to pursuing live prey. If the ghouls *were* to turn on any of the teams, sustained gunfire would steer them straight again.”

A young man raised his hand. “With the ghouls possessing the kind of strength you’re talking about, how can you be sure you’ll be able to contain them at the Canal Street station?”

I had descended into the station the day before with an armed backup force and several full-spectrum lights. Despite my chest-squeezing phobia of being underground—and that the space reeked of ghoul—I took my time etching defensive sigils over the station’s tunnels and exits. I planned to infuse the sigils with a high dose of energy, manifesting a field to contain the ghouls. But the Hundred didn’t need to know the magical details.

“I’m sure,” I replied.

“Well, what are you using for an incendiary?” the young man pressed. “Napalm? Thermite?”

Dragon sand, actually. Something else you don’t need to know. “A substance that will be harder to detect,” I replied. “Ghouls have a keen sense of smell.” When I looked around for any other raised hands, I noticed that the seat Vega had occupied was now empty.

Yeah, she hates me, I thought.

“Thank you, Professor,” Captain Cole said, approaching the lectern. I gathered up my notes and stepped from the stage as he addressed the auditorium. “The operation is scheduled to commence this Sunday at oh-seven-hundred. We’ll be conducting full-gear simulations at the Tactics Range in the Bronx every day until then, starting this afternoon.”

As the captain talked, I made my way to the back row and took the seat Vega had vacated. Hoffman shifted his bulk around to face me.

“Gotta hand it to you, Merlin,” he whispered. “You’ve kept this con going longer than I would’ve thought possible.”

“Con?” My temper flared. “What do you call that thing we battled in the storm lines this past spring?” I asked, referring to the werewolf-vampire hybrid.

“You talking about that albino woman?”

“Oh, is that what she was? Okay, forget the creature. How about how I yanked you out of harm’s way from thirty feet away?”

“Cheap trick. Any stage magician could’ve pulled that off.”

“And enclosed the creature in a light shield?”

Hoffman made a face as if whatever more I had to say wasn’t worth hearing. I had to remind myself that convincing him of my authenticity wasn’t why I was talking to him. I drew a deep breath and let it out through my nose along with the pent-up tension.

“Still working the Lady Bastet case?” I asked.

He eyed me with suspicion. “So what if I am?”

“Any leads?”

“Like I’m gonna tell you.”

I reached into the front pocket of my shirt and pulled out several Polaroids. My golem, Ed, had struck gold on his second day. I spread the shots over the chair’s table arm. “You sure?”

He frowned at the images. The top ones showed him chatting with one of Mr. Moretti’s men as he accepted an envelope. Subsequent photos showed him repeating the ceremony, this time with a representative of Mr. Brusilov, head of New York’s Russian crime family.

“Looks like we caught you on payday,” I said.

“Who in the hell took these? You?”

“Smile, you’re on Candid Camera.” I gathered the pictures up, tapped them into a neat stack, and slid them into my shirt pocket. “And there’s more where those came from.”

Hoffman leaned toward me until I could see every oily pore on his scrunched-up nose. “I’m gonna tell you two things,” he whispered, “and you better listen to both really fucking good. First, I’m in the middle of a sting operation. That’s what you’re photographing, you idiot. Second, what you’re doing here is attempted blackmail. I’m gonna let that go, ’cause frankly you’re not worth the paperwork. But I see you or your camera anywhere near me when I’m working, and I’m taking you in. You understand me? That’s five years on obstruction and another five on the blackmail. Let’s see how smart you think you are then.”

“A sting operation?” I said in mock surprise. “Oh, gee, the last thing I want is to interfere with the important work of the NYPD. A hundred apologies. Let me just turn these over to Captain Cole so he can discard of them properly. I’d hate for these to end up in the hands of an ambitious reporter.”

As I went to stand, Hoffman clamped my forearm, his fingers digging into the fleshy underside. I winced and tried to pry his fingers away. Captain Cole stopped talking and frowned up at us.

“Is there a problem, gentlemen?” he asked.

I looked at Hoffman, eyebrows raised. After a moment, he released me and shook his head. “No, sir,” he said. “No problem.”

I lowered myself back to the chair as Captain Cole resumed talking.

"What the hell do you want?" Hoffman asked in a fierce whisper, facing forward.

"What can you tell me about the Lady Bastet investigation?"

"Nothing," he said.

I started to stand again.

"What I mean is we don't have anything yet," he said quickly. "We recovered some trace evidence from the scene. Hair, fibers, that sort of thing. But it's a business, people come and go all the time. We have to crosscheck the evidence against her known clients. Even against *you*."

"No eyewitnesses?" I asked.

"If so, no one's talking."

"What about the cats?"

"What about 'em?" he sneered. "You think one of them saw something?"

"No, smartass. Any bite marks? Anything to suggest how they were decapitated?"

"Well, it wasn't from a blade. Those heads were torn off." He glanced over at me, his jaw working as though deciding whether or not to tell me something.

I tapped my shirt pocket containing the photos.

"We found something odd in the fur," he said at last.

"What?"

"Some sort of residue. Lab says it's mostly sulfur."

I kicked that around. Sulfur could mean a demonic presence. Had someone aided the wolves?

"So, we good?" Hoffman asked, his temples shiny with sweat.

"Not quite. I need a couple of things."

Hoffman's lips pressed together. "What?"

"First a sample of the residue."

"What else?"

"You should have a piece of hair in evidence. Light brown. About this long." I held my two index fingers a foot apart. "I want that, too."

"You're asking me to tamper with evidence?"

"Like you've never done that before," I said dryly. "This time, you'll actually be doing the investigation a favor. The hair belongs to me. Well, not *me* me, but someone I know. I brought it in for Lady Bastet to do a reading on. It would've ended up right around the murder scene. I want it back. Look at it this way. It'll be one less lead to track down."

"Anything else, Columbo?" he asked irritably.

"Yeah. Keep me up to date on the investigation."

"And you'll hand over the photos?"

“Every last one,” I promised.

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11

"They're slowing," a team leader's voice crackled over the feed.

In the tent serving as our command center, black-and-white monitors showed subway lines from the perspectives of the three below-ground teams. The message had come from the southbound team. Like the other two feeds, theirs depicted a graffiti-tagged tunnel narrowing into darkness. Save for the occasional bone pile and mound of excrement, the tunnel had been empty, the ghouls keeping well ahead of the rolling spotlights. Now, hulking shapes took form.

"How many?" Captain Cole asked into his headset.

"Their numbers have been building," the team leader answered, his slow steps rocking the feed from his helmet-mounted camera. *"Right now we're probably looking at a hundred or so. And they're getting louder."*

Grunts and whooping cries echoed through the feed.

Cole turned and looked at me. Beside him, the GPS map showed the three teams converging on the station below our feet. We were roughly fifteen minutes from a completed mission and with zero casualties. *How do we preserve this?* the captain's eyes were asking me.

I estimated the ghouls to be a hundred feet ahead of the southbound team. Not enough of a buffer.

"Have them turn up the lights and continue advancing," I advised. "But slowly."

"Did you catch that?" the captain asked through his headset.

"Roger that," the team leader replied. *"Lights up!"* he called.

The feed flared white before the camera adjusted and restored the grainy image. For a moment, the ghouls were exposed, hands and forearms guarding their eyes. They scrambled over one another to escape the full-spectrum light. My released breath relaxed my shoulders. If the ghouls had charged, the southbound team would have been in big trouble.

"Go ahead and have the other teams do the same," I said, "to be safe."

Cole gave the order. My heart lurched as the other two feeds lit up to show even larger crowds of ghouls. *Damn, more down there than I thought.* I was praying my defensive sigils would be up to the job,

when the leader of the southbound team's voice returned, his tone urgent.

"One of them's stopping."

On the feed, an especially large ghoul had lingered behind the others. He stood in a half crouch, an enormous knuckled hand shielding his face. Members of the armed team began to shout and squeeze air horns as they'd been instructed. But though the ghoul flinched, he didn't retreat. Beyond him, other ghouls began to slow, their misshapen heads turning to watch.

Their numbers are starting to embolden them, I thought.

"What's the call?" the captain asked me.

"Stop advancing, but continue with the noise," I said.

With the lights blinding their infrared vision, the ghouls didn't know who or what was bearing down on them. I needed them to think it was a larger, more terrifying force—despite that the ghouls held a ten to one advantage. The rest of the Hundred were acting as an aboveground backup force, ready to drop in if needed. I hoped it wouldn't come to that, but this idiot wasn't helping. The ghoul squinted above his hand before taking a sidestep toward the stalled team.

"Prof?" the captain prompted.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm thinking," I said.

Each team was armed with automatic rifles and pistols, as well as concussion grenades—any one of which *might* do the job. But they could also throw the ghouls into a panic, sending the creatures stampeding toward the team. A warning seemed the safest move, something to inflict pain while being clear where the source of that pain had originated.

"The flamethrower," I said. "Just a burst, though. Enough to get it moving."

"Hit it with the flame," the captain said. "To injure, not kill."

"Roger that."

On the feed, a team member moved to the fore, a small flame dancing at the end of a flamethrower's barrel. I held my breath, more sweat spreading over the back of my shirt. Either the flamethrower idea would work, or things were about to get really, really ugly.

"Be ready to drop in," Cole radioed to the backup team.

With a harsh whoosh, the feed turned bright white. A primal scream sounded as flames washed over the ghoul. A battle cry? But when the flames relented, the ghoul was loping away, the jacket of fire over its head and back guttering out. The ghouls that had stopped to watch fell into his bellowing wake until they were beyond the reach of the spotlights once more.

Thank God, I thought.

“Resume the advance,” Cole ordered.

“The teams are ten minutes from the target area,” a tech said from in front of the bank of monitors. “We’re already seeing some arrivals.”

I raised my eyes to the images of the abandoned station. The eerie infrared feeds showed the first ghouls shambling into view and then wheeling around in the face of ghouls arriving from the other directions. Several climbed onto the platform. Sensing they were being corralled, they scrambled over turnstiles and hammered their fists against the steel barriers beyond.

“I’m going to step out and ready the shields,” I told Cole. “Have them use the flames on any more stragglers. Let me know when the lines are clear.”

“Will do,” he said.

I stepped from the tent, squinting in the sudden light. In the center of the road, halfway between the station’s two entrances, I planted my feet. Eyes closed to the flashing police cordon several blocks ahead, I aligned myself with the defensive sigils I’d etched the day before. I reinforced the two shields over the subway exits to street level. Then I shifted my focus to the sigils at the mouths of the three lines feeding the station.

“Southbound line is clear,” a tech called from behind me.

“Cerrare,” I said. Energy flowed down my legs, through the street, and into the sigils. I felt a robust shield swell into place between the retreating southbound team and the station.

“Ditto the westbound line,” the tech called a minute later.

I repeated the Word, walling in the station from the east.

One to go.

At that moment, the droning of a fast-approaching vehicle broke through my concentration. *What the…?*

I wheeled around to find a white news van squealing to a stop behind me. A camera crew poured from the van’s side door. They weren’t the only ones. More news vans appeared, parking at odd angles over the closed-off road, ejecting crews who proceeded to unspool cables, off-load equipment, and aim cameras at the subway entrances.

A blond woman, whom I recognized as an anchor for one of the local news networks, appeared in a bright red dress and matching pumps. She primped her feathered hair and, mike in hand, nodded at her cameraman.

“We’re reporting from the Canal Street Station, where Mayor—”

“Hey!” I shouted. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing? We’re in the middle of an operation.” I turned toward the tent. “Captain Cole!’

The anchor frowned and made a cutting motion across her neck to

the cameraman.

"Do you mind?" she said to me.

"Do I *mind?*" I pictured the hundreds of ghouls pouring into the station right below us. I needed to concentrate, dammit. I thought I'd made that clear. Why wasn't anyone ushering these clowns out of here?

She planted a fist against her waist. "We're about to go live."

"Live? Here?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Who gave you authorization?"

The woman was opening her mouth when a black Escalade rolled into the mix. The anchor and cameras turned toward it. When the Escalade stopped, a bevy of security personnel emerged, one of them opening the passenger door. Budge's smiling face appeared.

"I don't fucking believe this," I muttered.

Budge climbed from the Escalade and tottered toward the blond anchor. "Courtney, honey, how are you? Not still knocking around with that bum from Channel 4, I hope."

Courtney's lips pursed into a flirty smile. "Ancient history."

"Good," Budge said. "'Cause you're way out of his league. Better anchor, too."

I charged toward him. "Sorry to interrupt your little chat, but you let them through?"

Budge stumbled around until his watery eyes fixed on mine. "Well, sure," he said. "Someone has to document the moment of triumph." When he laughed, I caught a waft of alcohol.

"That wasn't the plan," I said through clenched teeth.

"And who's this?" Courtney asked Budge.

The mayor pushed his way past his security detail and grabbed me around the shoulder. The cameras followed him. "This," he said, hugging me to his side, "is my secret weapon."

"Let's keep it down, huh?" I whispered.

"Everson Croft!" he proclaimed. "New York City's greatest wizard!"

I felt the color drain from my face as I looked wildly from camera to camera.

Courtney squeezed in beside me and motioned her cameraman into position. He pointed at her to go. "I'm standing here with Mayor Lowder," Courtney said, "and who he's calling his 'secret weapon' in his campaign to rid the city of evil creatures, wizard extraordinaire, Everson Craft."

"Croft," the mayor corrected her.

"He's only joking, you know," I said.

"I'm sorry. Everson *Croft*," she amended. "Can you tell us in what capacity you're helping the mayor, Mr. Croft? Are you employing standard magic, or have you cooked up something special for the

campaign?" She tipped the microphone toward me, eyes glittering in fascination.

As far as the Order was concerned, we revealed our magical identities at our own risk. And in a city like New York, risks ran aplenty. Especially now, with public outrage over supernaturals growing by the day.

"Mr. Croft?" Courtney prompted.

With energy I couldn't afford to expend, I swelled my wizarding aura. One by one, the blinking lights of the cameras went dark. Courtney's cameraman lowered the contraption from his shoulder and looked at it.

"Something inside just blew," he grumbled.

"Well, grab the backup," Courtney snapped. "Hurry!"

"Northbound line is clear," the tech called from the tent.

I wriggled from between Courtney and the mayor. "I need everyone to get back," I called. "Way back."

Budge gave an embarrassed laugh. "That's not necessary, folks."

"Yes, it is," I told them. I lowered my voice so only Budge could hear me. "If you don't want this operation turning into a shit show on live television, you're going to get them out of here. Now."

The mayor's face sobered. "Will a block be enough?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Just get them out of my hair."

"You heard him," Budge said, pushing his hands toward the crews. "Back it up a block. The man needs to work." The mayor's security detail formed a line and walked them back.

"You too," I told Budge as I stepped past him.

God, what a frigging nightmare.

With the intersection to myself again, I drew a calming breath and aligned myself with the final sigils.

"Cerrare," I said.

A shudder rose through the pavement as the final shield manifested. The station was boxed in. I could feel the ghouls ramming against my magical defenses, trying to escape. I pushed more energy into the shields as I awaited the final word. It came only a moment later.

"All teams clear," the tech called.

I shifted my focus from the shields to the dragon sand scattered over the station floor. Four hundred ghouls versus a two thousand-degree inferno? I was putting my money on the inferno.

"Fuoco!" I shouted.

In an explosive instant, the dragon sand ignited. The intersection shook. Up and down the street, red-orange flames jetted from vents. And now a roaring chorus took up, the dying cries of ghouls.

But I couldn't relax just yet. I'd felt the shields bow out from the

explosion. If even one of the defenses failed, the ghouls could escape the inferno and regenerate. I went sigil to sigil, reinforcing the enclosure with spoken Words.

North and southbound lines … check. Westbound line … check. West entrance to the station … check. East entrance to the sta—

Something rammed into my side, spinning me in a half circle. I lost my balance and fell to the street. I also lost the Word, having only uttered half of it. I looked around for my assailant and found one of the cameramen running toward the subway entrance. His half-exposed belly swung side to side as he moved in for a better shot. That's what had felled me.

Swearing, I realigned my thoughts with the sigils over the station's East entrance. *Oh, crap.* My fragment of a Word had not only failed to reinforce the shield; it had dissolved it.

"Cerrare!" I cried.

The shield crackled and spread back into being, but I felt it crunch through bone. Ghouls had already begun to escape. I opened my eyes to the station's east entrance. The shadowy pit glowed with fire.

The cameraman had reached the sidewalk and was aiming his backup camera down the station's steps. He couldn't have known what he was looking at. He was still filming when the first blazing ghoul appeared. With a fiery slash, the ghoul opened the man's stomach. The man dropped to his knees, his innards gushing out, then collapsed beside his smashed camera. Three more ghouls scrambled over him, igniting his hair and clothes.

Behind me, members of the news crews began to scream.

"Get back!" the mayor was hollering. "Everybody back!"

Driven to blind rage by fire and pain, the four ghouls oriented to the panicked sounds—and charged.

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"*Vigore!*" I cried.

The force that shook from my sword slammed into the lead ghoul. He roared as he was blown backwards, red fire pluming upon his collision against the metal entranceway that framed the stairs to the station.

A moment later, he was back on his feet.

With a shouted *"Protezione!"* I threw up a shield across the street. Because of the energy I'd just expended, the manifestation was weak. The charging ghouls crashed through it.

What now? I thought as I backpedaled.

The ghouls were close enough for me to smell their burning flesh. Flesh that, beneath the thinning flames, was beginning to regenerate. I cast my staff aside and gripped my sword in both hands. Attempting to decapitate four rampaging ghouls was tantamount to suicide, but there were innocents behind me.

Automatic gunfire chattered from either side. The ghouls flinched from the impact of bullets. Armored vehicles were rolling in, backup members of the Hundred firing from the vehicles' sides.

"Their heads!" I shouted in reminder. "Aim for their heads!"

If the hollow-point bullets could penetrate the creatures' dense skulls, they might inflict enough brain damage to drop them. At that thought, two of the ghouls' heads exploded in rapid succession. The flaming creatures collapsed to the street. A third ghoul joined them.

The ghoul I'd knocked into the station's entranceway did not, however. With a bellow, he lowered his head, impervious to the bullets blowing bits of flaming flesh from his hide.

My backward jog turned into a backward run, until I rammed into the mayor. His broad back remained to the ghouls as he pushed his arms toward the news crews, yelling for them to disperse. He ignored his security detail, one of whom had wheeled the Escalade around while another was trying to pull him toward the vehicle's open passenger door. I could see on Budge's corpse-white face that he believed he was watching his campaign swirl down the drain in front of the very opinion shapers he'd invited to the event.

I regained my footing as a foul heat seared the side of my face.

Shoving Budge forward, I spun with my sword. The blade flashed, catching the ghoul's incoming arm at the wrist. A flaming hand dropped to the street, not far from where Budge and the security man had tumbled down.

The ghoul jerked back his spouting arm and let out a window-shaking howl. The gunfire had stopped, I noticed, the ghoul too close to the mayor for the Hundred to risk another fusillade.

"Christ Almighty!" Budge exclaimed, seeing the creature up close for the first time.

The ghoul, who had been thrashing in a circle, oriented to the sound and lunged. I reacted, swinging my sword like a golfer teeing off. I saw immediately that I'd gone too wide. The blade cleaved into shoulder but then rang off a knot of bone, implanting itself in the ghoul's thick neck.

Yes!

The ghoul stumbled to his knees. I twisted and sawed, trying to complete the decapitation, but the blade became wedged between a pair of vertebrae. I grunted with effort as flames and noxious fumes burned around me.

Without warning, pain exploded through my left calf. I looked down to see the flaming hand I'd severed seizing my lower leg. The detached appendages of ghouls, as well as various undead, could do that, but it was one of those things you always imagined happening to someone else.

I kicked my leg, but the fingers bit fast, nails sinking through skin and muscle. I shouted and reversed course, trying to yank the blade free now. But the vertebrae held it like a pair of pincers. Behind the ghoul's melted lids, the bulbous orbs of his eyeballs shifted. The thing was coming to. His good arm reared back, black claws level with my face.

"Forza dura!" I shouted.

A force exploded from the sword, freeing the blade and throwing me to the ground. With a chopping downstroke, I hacked the severed hand from my leg. Above me, the ghoul wavered to its feet. Its flaming head lolled to one side, the spine barely supporting it.

"Christ Almighty!" the mayor repeated, still down.

I scrambled toward him on hands and knees and shielded him with my body. Turning to the gunmen, I shouted, "Finish it!"

The explosion was immediate. I twisted my head enough to catch the effect. Bullets chewed through what remained of the neck. Ghoul and head fell to the street, the second rolling toward the gutter.

The gunfire ceased. Except for the crackling of burning bodies, the intersection was quiet.

I rolled off Budge. We both sat up and looked around. The news

crews that had retreated in panic crept forward, several cameras fixed on the headless body burning in the street.

"Is everyone all right?" Budge asked, gaining his feet.

Captain Cole emerged from the tent and gave him a thumb's up: the operation had succeeded. Budge nodded, swiped the hair from his brow, and hustled around until he was in front of the cameras.

"My fellow New Yorkers," he said, "you've now seen the horrible menace with your own eyes. You've also witnessed what happens when a determined leader mobilizes the best resources to confront that menace head on. We're not done yet, but we're on our way. Phase one of the eradication program is complete." He swept an arm out. "The ghoul threat to our great city is ended!"

I had to hand it to him. Whatever the man lacked in common sense, he made up for in political instincts. The picture of him in front of the creature carnage was going to look pretty damn impressive on tomorrow's front pages.

"I'll be more than happy to take your questions now," he said, then broke into his signature *aw-shucks* smile as the cameras and clamoring reporters pressed in. "One at a time, please."

I CAUGHT the coverage that evening on my portable television, an early rabbit-ear model that tolerated my aura better than most. The local stations devoured the story, devoting their entire news slots to that morning's operation, the coverage ranging from favorable to gushing.

"…an estimated four hundred ghouls eliminated," Courtney was saying as I shifted the pillows that propped up my wounded leg. *"And with that, the mayor claims he's on his way to eliminating* all *supernatural threats from the city, though he said that will require a second term."*

"Well played, Budge," I muttered to the television.

"Just a second term?" Tabitha yawned from the divan. "Does he have any idea how many of us there are?"

"He said *threats.* And he's only going after the worst of the worst."

"Well, there are plenty of those." Tabitha began ticking them off her paw. "Soul eaters, succubi, incubi…"

"*Clear and present* threats," I amended. "Ones that give the mayor the biggest political payout. He's not going to risk chasing beings that ninety-nine percent of the city can't even see." My head ached with the urge to be right. Or maybe I was determined for the vampire Arnaud to be wrong.

"Well, what about me and you?" Tabitha asked.

"What about us? We're not threats to anyone. Hardly anyone even

knows we exist." A vein in my temple began to throb now, as though I were making the argument to Arnaud himself.

I awaited Tabitha's response, but she was staring past me, a grin growing across her furry lips. I followed her gaze back to the television. A headshot appeared through the snowy reception, one I recognized.

"You were saying?" Tabitha purred.

"In the excitement of today's operation, an interesting figure emerged," Courtney said in a chirpy, you're-not-going-to-believe-this tone. *"His name is Everson Croft. He's a college professor, a consultant to the mayor, and a modern day wizard. I saw it with my own eyes, folks. Watch here as he battles a flaming ghoul, using only a sword and magical incantations."*

I'd thought all of the cameramen had been in retreat, but at least one had had the brass to stop and shoot. Shaky film rolled of the moment I caught the ghoul in the neck. I could see the severed hand crawling up behind me like a giant spider. Leaping, it affixed itself to my leg. The rest happened quickly. The shouted Word, the ghoul stumbling backwards, me hacking the hand away and shielding the mayor, and at last, the ghoul succumbing to the hail of bullets.

"How delicious," Tabitha said.

"Whatever his title," Courtney continued, *"I think we can agree that Everson Croft is a hero*—our *hero—and someone we'll continue to follow closely. From all of us here at TV 20, goodnight."*

I sagged back in my chair as the credits rolled over the dimming news set. I couldn't believe it. I was the night's feel-good closer.

"Well, this should make things interesting," Tabitha said.

"Yeah, no thanks to *Budge*." I limped over to the television and slapped the power button. "Invites every major network to the ghoul roast, then shows up drunk and starts blabbing about his secret wizard weapon."

"Not so secret now."

"No kidding. The jerk just made me a walking target."

"That's what you get for dealing with a politician. I've seduced many over the centuries. They're the same everywhere."

I hopped on my good leg to the phone on the kitchen counter. I'd infused the injuries from the ghoul-hand attack with healing magic, but the claw punctures had been deep and bacteria ridden, meaning a longer mend time.

"What are you doing?" Tabitha asked.

"What do you think? Calling the mayor to tell him I'm out."

I'd reasoned that my inclusion in the eradication program would make me safer. Right now, I felt anything but. My identity had just been broadcast to every New Yorker with a television, which was most of them. The morning papers would take care of the rest.

“Let’s not be hasty, darling,” she said. “The mayor’s office is compensating you handsomely, after all. Your income from the college is nice, but it’s hardly adequate to our lifestyles.”

She meant her lifestyle, but I wasn’t processing anything past “college.” I dropped the receiver back in its cradle.

“Crap.”

Tabitha gave a startled blink. “What is it, darling?”

“My chairman,” I said. “Snodgrass.”

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13

I burst through the front doors of Midtown College, tucking my shirt in as I ran. I hadn't slept a wink the night before and so shouldn't have been late, but I made the mistake of buying several morning papers from the corner newsstand and carrying them back to my apartment to peruse. Time escaped me, and for good reason. All but one of the circulars mentioned my inclusion in the eradication program. A few devoted entire columns to the story of the New York wizard.

I huffed out a curse. *Snodgrass has been waiting for this,* I thought as I pulled off the fake beard and sunglasses I'd donned to avoid public recognition. *Waiting for something he can use to toss me from the college. And now he has it, dammit.*

He would make good on his threat to alarm the parents of my students, to get them to yank their children from my courses. "After all," I could hear him telling them, "you don't want him corrupting your daughter's mind with some enchantment or whatever else he decides to put in there. If he's kept his real identity a secret for this long, what else might he be hiding?"

No students meant no classes. No classes meant no job.

I skittered around the corner of the hallway and was met by a wall of noise. "This is a graduate-level seminar," I heard Snodgrass shouting as I drew nearer. "It *cannot* be audited."

Huh?

I arrived at my classroom and peered through the half-open door to find my chairman standing and waving his arms at a mob scene, his face turning the same dark burgundy as his bowtie. "Did you hear me?" he demanded. "This is a closed course. If you are not registered, leave *now.*"

Was this my classroom? I leaned back to read the number over the door before looking inside again. This time I spotted my six regular students at their desks. But the remaining students, including the fifty or so jockeying for standing room, were completely new to me.

"There he is!" one of them shouted.

Heads swiveled toward me. A fresh clamor went up. The students surged in my direction, Snodgrass disappearing behind them. A multitude of mouths talked at once. "Is it true?" "Did you do those

things on television?" "Are you a real wizard?" "Can I take your course?"

Several pushed newspapers and drop-add cards at me.

I held up my hand and cane in a warding gesture and backed against the door. The students, most of them young women, formed a jabbering semicircle around me, admiration bright on their faces.

My God, they're serious.

Snodgrass fought his way through the crowd, fixing his skewed glasses as he arrived beside me. "Professor Croft," he shouted above the commotion. "A word outside, please."

I followed him into the hallway and forced the door closed behind me. He proceeded down the hallway a short distance, stopped suddenly, and wheeled on the high heels of his leather shoes.

"*What* in the devil do you think you're doing?" he said.

I looked from him to the students' faces crowding the classroom door window.

"Croft!" he snapped.

"I'm sorry … what?"

"This is an academic institution, not some camp for teeny-boppers. Is this a stunt to improve your enrollment?"

"Stunt?"

"Did you compel those students to attend your class through some inducement?"

A realization struck me. As impossible as it seemed, Snodgrass had yet to hear the news. I walked backwards until I reached the classroom door and opened it to a surge of noise.

"You," I said, pointing to a young woman. "May I borrow your paper?"

With all the reverence of a virgin making an offering to a god, she stepped forward and handed me her copy of the *Gazette*. As she retreated back into the masses with a mad giggle, I closed the door and returned to Snodgrass. He accepted the paper as though I was up to some trickery.

"Page one," I said.

I watched his eyes fall to the lead headline:

CITY: 1 MONSTERS: 0. MAYOR'S PROGRAM OFF TO BLAZING START

The photo underneath showed members of the Hundred firing on the final flaming ghoul while I covered the sprawled-out mayor. Snodgrass's eyes skipped to the sidebar: "LOCAL WIZARD STARS IN EFFORT." My smiling headshot had been lifted from the college's online directory.

I still wasn't thrilled about the exposure, but it appeared to have boosted my status with the students—something that was dawning on Snodgrass as well. I couldn't pass up the opportunity.

"Those *tendencies* of mine you mentioned last week?" I said as he read. "Well, they're out there now, and guess what? The students of Midtown College are *loving* them." I embellished the word with a lascivious flick of my tongue.

Snodgrass's eyelids blinked rapidly. At last, he folded the paper with a sniff.

"This changes nothing," he announced tersely. "I still plan to phone parents. I would be remiss as department chair if I didn't. In the meantime, I want those students out of your—"

At that moment, the chairman of the college board, Mr. Cowper, rounded the corner with the seven other board members. Cowper pulled up when he spotted me and smacked his flabby lips.

"Ah, Professor Croft," he said. "We were just discussing you in our meeting."

"Oh, yeah?" I tried to read the sagging folds of his face to discern whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. Maybe I'd turned on the cocky too soon.

"Yes, we've received a positive *avalanche* of inquiries this morning about your fall courses," he said. "We were wondering if you might consider increasing your offerings. You'd be compensated, of course. And it couldn't hurt your application for tenure."

"Y-yeah, of course," I stammered. "I'll see what I can come up with."

"Please do," Cowper said. "It will really help out enrollment. Especially in *this* department." He looked pointedly at Snodgrass before issuing a final lip smack and moving off with the others.

I grinned down at my department chair. "It just keeps getting better."

A tremor moved across Snodgrass's blanching face. "I don't care *what* you are," he said, shoving the newspaper against my chest and pointing past me. "I want those cretins out of your classroom. Now."

"What's the matter? Afraid your department will be overrun by ancient mythology and lore majors?"

"It's a—a—a—" His lips sputtered, unable to spit out the word.

"Tell you what. While you're figuring out what *it* is, I'll go ahead and start my lecture."

I pivoted on my cane.

"This isn't over, Croft!" he shouted at my back.

I waggled my fingers over a shoulder in farewell before opening the door and wading into my new fan base.

AFTER CLASS—A two-hour session that featured a lecture on the ghoul myth across cultures, a long Q&A about my role in yesterday's operation (which I played *way* down), and ended with me adding twenty-two new students to the course—I called Hoffman and arranged to meet him at a deli down the street from the college.

The detective arrived, shaking his head. "Must really think you're hot stuff, huh? 'Local Wizard Stars in Effort,'" he said, reciting the *Gazette* headline. "What a bunch of crap."

I shrugged in answer. Hoffman tossed a pile of paperwork onto the far end of the booth seat and collapsed opposite me. His tie was loosened and the sleeves of his sweat-stained shirt bunched up to his elbows.

"Tough morning on the bribery circuit?" I asked.

Hoffman's cheeks clenched at the dig. "I saw your little photographer buddy earlier."

I straightened and peered around. It had been several days since I'd last seen Ed. When he didn't come home for good, I assumed the spell had expired and he'd collapsed into a clay mound somewhere. I'd been planning a hunting spell to retrieve the amulet. "Where?" I asked.

"I was gonna give him a fat lip," Hoffman went on, "but the weasel took off. Ran like a little girl."

"And yet it was enough to outrun you," I pointed out.

Before Hoffman could respond, the waitress arrived with the two coffees I'd ordered. As she walked away, Hoffman leveled a thick finger at me through the steam.

"I'll say it again. Those photos don't show what you think they do. I'm just going along with this 'cause I don't want you making a goddamned mess of my operation. Do you have the photos?"

"The info first," I said.

Hoffman peered around, then hunched over the table. "The lab's still going through the trace evidence. So far it all matches up with the woman's clients. We're interviewing them. No suspects yet."

"Any of them work in security?" I asked, thinking about the werewolves.

"The clients?" He snorted. "They're about the farthest thing from security you can get. They were seeing her for potions and palm readings. Bunch of fruitcakes if you ask me."

That didn't make any sense. The wolves had to have left *something.*

A Ziploc bag landed in front of me. Inside was a clump of gray hair.

"Your residue," Hoffman said. "Techs still don't know where the

stuff came from."

While Hoffman gulped his coffee, I held the bag up to my eyes. Squinting, I could make out a fine yellow dust on the ends of the cat hairs. When I unsealed the bag, the faintest odor of rotten eggs leaked out. Definitely sulfurous. I resealed the bag, folded it over, and placed it inside my leather satchel. I would run some spells on the residue back at my apartment.

"How about the human hair I asked for?" I said.

"Not in evidence."

"What?"

"You said light brown and about a foot long, right?"

I nodded, remembering the final hair I'd drawn from my mother's brush.

"I checked the log," Hoffman said. "Nothing like that was collected. They found a little shriveled-up piece of hair on the victim's lap, though. The DNA was too corrupted to test."

"Her lap?"

Heat shriveled hair, but so did intense magic. I recalled how I'd discovered the mystic: slumped in her chair, arms at her sides. She had probably been yanked into that position from behind, the hair she had been handling falling onto her lap. Had Lady Bastet completed the reading before her murder? Had she seen who killed my mother?

Hoffman's voice broke through my racing thoughts. "We done here?"

I collected myself. "One more question."

"That's all I know about the case."

"Not about the case. It's about, um, Vega."

"What, you got a little thing for her?" He smirked. "I'll tell you what, buddy, she sure doesn't like *you* anymore."

"Did she say why?"

I got that we had hit a nasty bump in the spring, but that had been four months ago. Could she still be that upset? I considered how she'd treated me at the crime scene, the look she'd shot me at my presentation on the ghoul operation. There had to be another reason.

"Hey, your problem, not mine," Hoffman said with a harsh laugh. "Ask me, she recovered her senses." He finished off the rest of his coffee and held out a hand. "The photos."

I pulled a stack of Polaroids from my satchel. "These are most of them."

"What do you mean, 'most of 'em'?" Hoffman snatched the photos away and flipped through them like they were playing cards.

"I'm keeping the rest. You can earn them back by finding me suspects."

The thick flesh of Hoffman's brow collapsed down. "Listen, you

little smartass—”

His voice broke off as a large shadow fell across our table. The redheaded werewolf brothers were looming over us.

I reached for where I kept my revolver before remembering those two had destroyed it. For a moment, I remembered how Grandpa’s possessions had existed in twos. In his tool shed, he’d kept two sets of everything—hand drills, claw hammers, awls—and always the same kind. Ditto his night robe and slippers, his pocket watch, his fedora. I snuck into his bathroom once and discovered two identical shaving mirrors beside two identical straight razors. When I asked my grandmother about this, she told me he had always acquired things in pairs. His reasoning? If something broke or went missing, he had an immediate replacement.

Too bad I hadn’t adopted the habit. With the inflating costs of firearms, I wasn’t sure I could even afford a replacement now.

Muscles swelled beneath the wolves’ security guard uniforms, but I was preoccupied by the burn in their irises. Left to their pack instincts, the brothers would tear me apart. Hoffman must have sensed the potential for violence, too.

“Been nice chatting,” he said, scooting from the booth. “Gonna leave you to your friends.”

“Mayor wants to meet with you,” Flint said to me as Hoffman bustled away.

“We make appointments for those now.” I blew on my coffee and raised it to my lips. Werewolf or not, I didn’t care for his threatening tone.

Flint thumped the mug with a finger. It flew from my grasp and shattered against the tile wall. Hot coffee rained over the table. I looked down at my dripping hand, then over at Flint.

“Problem?” I asked.

“Next time, it’s your head,” Flint growled.

“Is that what you told Lady Bastet?” I asked, testing him.

The muscles around his nose bunched up. “Don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. Now let’s go.”

I searched Flint’s and Evan’s eyes. If either had been involved in Lady Bastet’s murder, they were disguising it well. I pulled several napkins from the dispenser and began drying my hands.

“Fine,” I said. “But I’m not riding with you. I’ll catch a cab.”

Flint snarled and lunged toward me. Evan caught him by the arm and grimaced, clearly fighting his own inner beast. Whoever was running the pack in Penny’s stead had forbidden them from exacting revenge against me. But who would that be? Budge? As a mortal, he wouldn’t wield that kind of power. There had to be a second in command somewhere.

Flint controlled himself and straightened. “One o’clock,” he growled. “Or we come back.”

I’d been anxious to return to my apartment to begin work on the sulfur residue, but I’d get nothing done with a pair of pissed-off werewolves in the back of my mind. Plus, I still intended to resign from the eradication team—something I could do in person. Though the press coverage had improved my position at Midtown College, any further attention would only hurt. I consulted my watch.

“Tell the mayor it’s a date.”

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14

The cab dropped me off at the checkpoint outside the plaza that fronted City Hall. The guard, another werewolf, studied my ID with a snarl while a second wolf gave me a bruising pat down. They returned my ID and shoved me through. I limped over the plaza, squinting from the bright concrete.

"Everson."

I looked up to find Caroline descending from City Hall's columned portico, one hand forming a visor above her eyes. She was dressed in business attire and carrying a black leather briefcase over one shoulder. She looked like a lobbyist, which I supposed she was. Among other things.

I met her halfway up the steps.

"You came," she said.

"Yeah," I replied, not sure what she meant. "I'm supposed to meet with the mayor."

She angled herself so the sun was no longer in her face and lowered her hand. When her blue-green eyes searched mine, a keen pain pierced my chest. I looked back at her neutrally.

"My offer still stands," she said.

"You mean the vacation in the faerie realm? I'm handling things pretty well up here, thanks."

"That could change."

"So you've said."

Her lips pressed together. "Everson—"

"I've worked out something with Budge," I said, cutting her off. "I help him, he helps me. And as much as I dislike the press attention, it now means he hurts me at his own risk. Same goes for Penny, if she ever wakes up." Though the rationale sounded good, I still intended to resign. I just wasn't going to tell Caroline that—for no other reason than to challenge her.

"*Were* things to go wrong," she said, a thin comma forming between her eyebrows, "do you have somewhere you can go? Someplace safe?"

I thought of Arnaud's offer of a renewed alliance.

"It won't come to that," I said.

“I see a lot more than you can.”

“Care to share?”

A breeze blew a strand of hair over Caroline’s cheek. I had to restrain myself from brushing it back behind her ear. Too much had happened since the night we’d held each other. She fastened the hair away herself, eyes flicking to the bottom of the steps. My gaze followed. A tall, striking figure in a Cambridge suit leaned against a flagpole, his copper hair shining in the sun.

The sight of Angelus kicked me in the heart with both legs.

“You should probably go,” I said, already starting to leave. “Don’t want to keep hubby waiting.”

She seized my arm, the force turning me so I was facing her again. “You’re standing on a precipice, Everson. And it’s crumbling.” The aggression in her voice and grip surprised me.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re not as safe as you think you are.” She released me. “Let me *help* you.”

A determination in her eyes seemed to be masking a deeper conflict. For a moment, I thought she was going to lunge at me—though whether to strangle or kiss me, I couldn’t tell.

I glanced over at Angelus, who was still watching us.

“I don’t need your help,” I said, and paced up the steps.

This time, Caroline let me go.

I GROANED when I spotted the werewolf brothers waiting for me beyond the scanners inside the City Hall building. “What are these two?” I muttered. “Part retriever?”

“You’re late,” Flint said. “Follow us.”

“Thanks, but I know the way to the mayor’s office.” I stepped around them toward the elevators.

“We’re not going to the mayor’s office.” Flint grabbed my right arm above the elbow. Evan took my left, and the two began marching me down a long hallway. I twisted my shoulders, but their large hands held me like a pair of manacles, fastening me between them.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded.

Flint touched an earpiece. “We’ve got him.”

Who was he talking to? The pack’s second in command?

Evan drew a key and unlocked a door that opened onto a narrow, empty corridor. The wolves turned their wide frames such that Flint was pulling me, Evan pushing me. They hadn’t confiscated my weapon, which seemed odd. Still, Caroline’s warning flashed hot in my mind.

You're not as safe as you think you are.

"Respingere!" I cried.

From the opal in my cane, white light detonated. My arms wrenched violently as the force blasted Flint down the corridor and Evan back into the door we'd just entered through. The pain in my left shoulder registered a moment later, as well as the familiar clunk of dislocation.

Dammit.

Supporting the infirm arm at the elbow, I ran back toward the door. It had collapsed out into the main hallway with Evan's impact, along with Evan. But in the next instant, Evan sprang up and activated his earpiece. If he was calling for backup, the hallway would soon be swarming with wolves. He pawed for his holstered firearm. Another deal breaker.

I stopped and reversed course. Down the narrow corridor, Flint was slower to recover. He staggered to his feet, blood on his brow. If I could get past him, I could search for a rear exit. When he saw me coming, he sank to his haunches, a deep growl growing from his chest.

Have to keep going. Have to hit him hard enough to make him stay down.

Fumbling my cane apart, I held the staff weakly in my left hand. Manifesting a shield, I used additional Words to shape it into something resembling a battering ram. I sensed Evan bounding up from behind. With my right hand, I aimed the sword behind me at an acute angle to the floor. I'd managed this once before in a car but never while running.

"Forza dura!" I shouted.

The power that stormed from the sword hit the floor and launched me forward like a rocket. I hurtled down the corridor. Flint tried to throw himself out of the way, but in an explosion of sparks, the battering shield rammed into him and left him tumbling in my wake.

The floor rose quickly as the blast from the sword petered out. My front foot caught the carpet, and I was thrown into a bruising roll that shot fresh pain through my shoulder. My head absorbed some solid shots as well.

I stood and staggered in two nauseating circles to collect my weapons and orient myself. My casting prism was shot, but behind me, Flint was still down. I turned back toward the end of the corridor, where a door with a red crash bar read: EMERGENCY EXIT.

Just need to get out of here.

I shambled toward the exit—and nearly collided into a side door that swung out in front of me. A man wearing a headset and Prada sunglasses peered out. "There you are!" he exclaimed in a prissy voice. "Get *in* here!"

I stared for a moment, trying to figure out if I should know him. The man's frosted hair stood in a voluminous coif, while his black designer shirt opened on a thin, hairless chest. His sleeves flapped as he motioned for me to come. Though the eyes beyond the tinted lenses were animated, I could discern no werewolf in them. A touch of faerie, maybe.

"Come *on!*" He seized my wrist with dainty, but insistent, force.

I glanced back at the wolves. Flint was struggling to his hands and knees, and Evan had disappeared from view, probably to intercept me on the other side of the emergency exit. In my still-woozy state, I allowed the man to pull me after him. He led me through a warren of corridors.

"I'm Marcus, by the way—goodness!" he exclaimed, glancing at me over a shoulder. "You look absolutely hideous."

"Huh?" I was still struggling to work out who the man was and what he wanted.

"I have him, but he needs work. Can you hold them off for another ten." I realized Marcus was talking into his headset. He let out a dramatic sigh. "I need to *work* on him, Dwayne. He's an utter disaster."

I pulled against him. "Look, this is where we're going to have to part ways."

Marcus pushed me into a brightly lit room and looked me up and down. "Wrong hair, wrong fashion, wrong, wrong, *wrong!*"

He stamped a foot for emphasis, making me jump back. I bumped into something at thigh level and lost my balance. A padded chair caught me. Marcus swiveled the chair until I was staring at a dressing-room mirror. He frowned studiously over my right shoulder as he turned the chair each way and then began finger-teasing the hair on the sides of my head.

"Ugh. I can't work with this," he decided.

Before I could stand from the chair, it collapsed backwards and I was looking at the ceiling. Warm water gushed against my brow. In the next moment, Marcus was massaging cold conditioner into my hair. "I want elegant for you," he said, "with a touch of rakish, a touch of … *le mystérieux.*"

I struggled from Marcus's fingers and threw myself over the side of the chair. I landed on my hands and knees, sputtering as conditioner streamed down my face and into my eyes. Someone jerked my cane away, and a pair of hands seized me roughly by the arms. I was lifted into the air and slammed into the chair with enough force to relocate my left shoulder.

"Stay put until he's done," a gruff voice ordered.

I squinted my stinging eyes open to find Flint and Evan standing in

the doorway, wearing pissed-off expressions. But they weren't coming at me. I looked from their earpieces to Marcus's headset. Was this who they'd been trying to deliver me to?

Marcus sighed as fresh water showered over my face and hair. "Are *all* wizards this difficult?"

With the werewolves standing guard, my cane in their possession and my casting prism offline, I had no choice but to let Marcus complete his work—to what purpose, I still had no idea.

Following a quick washing, Marcus scrubbed my hair with a towel and used a brush and blow dryer to give it a feathered look. He moved to makeup next, smearing a base layer over my face. He then came at me with various stencils, brushes, and lip glosses—"Or else the lights will reduce you to a corpse," he said. Rather than explain further, he talked into his headset in emotional bursts, demanding a few more minutes from this Dwayne.

"There," he said at last, standing out of my view of the mirror.

I hardly recognized the face staring back at me. "What in the hell?"

"Don't touch it!" Marcus squealed, swatting my hand down.

I pursed my lips to make sure the copper-colored reflection was mine. In addition to the fake tan, Marcus had drawn over my eyebrows, making them more dramatic, with little curls on the ends. The harsh rouge along my cheekbones complemented the bright red of my lips.

"There's nothing elegant or mysterious about this," I said, searching around for something to wipe it off with. "I look fucking ridiculous."

Marcus nodded at Flint and Evan, and they pulled me from the chair. Marcus reappeared with a black cape. "Here," he said, fastening it around my neck. "There's no time to change you out of that shirt, so keep the cape closed. Oh, and let's get this on you." He turned and reappeared with a leather hat with a huge brim and tall bulbous crown, which he set atop my head.

"Now you look the part," he said.

"For the hundredth time, what's this for?" I demanded.

Marcus tilted the hat slightly. "He's ready," he said into his headset.

Flint and Evan escorted me from the dressing room and up a short flight of steps to a door. Flint knocked, and another man with a headset answered—Dwayne, I presumed.

"Great, thanks, guys," he whispered to the wolves.

The wolves slammed the cane against my chest and shoved me into the dark room after Dwayne.

"Don't worry," Dwayne said in a breathless voice, "you're not going to have to speak. After your introduction, you're to stand behind

the mayor, a bit to his right. We've marked the spot with tape. Try to affect a mysterious look. Better yet, brooding. They'll eat that up."

"Who?" I asked.

"Ooh! They're ready for you."

Dwayne led me around a corner until we were peering out onto a small stage from the side. The mayor, who stood at the podium where he gave press conferences, glanced over at us.

"And here he is, ladies and gentlemen," Budge announced. "The man—or rather, wizard—of the hour, Everson Croft!"

Oh, hell no.

I tried to turn around, but Dwayne blocked me and pushed me out onto the stage. I emerged into the packed press room to a detonation of camera flashes and shouted questions. Budge seized my hand and pumped vigorously. "Thanks for coming," he whispered. The handshake went on for several seconds as he smiled toward the cameras. He finally released me, nodding toward the X taped on the floor behind him. Stunned by the sudden attention, I dutifully took up my position and faced the press in my makeup and hat.

"Mr. Croft!" a reporter shouted. "Where did you learn your magic?"

"I, ah…"

"C'mon, guys," Budge answered for me. "You know a good magician never reveals his secrets."

"How powerful are you?" someone else shouted.

Budge laughed. "What do you think? I went out and found some weakling wizard? He's the most powerful in New York. And he's working for me and my administration."

I grimaced at the lie—I may not even have been the most powerful on my block—but I saw what Budge was doing. He was fanning the positive interest in me in order to claim the glow for himself.

"Can you give us a demonstration?" another reporter asked.

An excited chorus of "yeah"s followed.

"No, no," Budge said, waving his hands, "there'll be none of that. Everson needs to conserve his power for the next phase of the eradication program. And if you thought the ghouls were something, wait till you see what's coming up."

"If he's so powerful," a female reporter cut in, "what's to stop him from turning on the city?" I saw the anxiety in the young woman's eyes—exactly why I kept a low profile. The mood of the assembly seemed to pivot as several reporters around her nodded.

I watched the mayor for his response.

"Look, I've known Everson a long time," he lied. "Besides being a potent wizard, he's a man of integrity. A man of morals. And hey, he's a fellow New Yorker. We have a mutual interest in protecting the city

that raised us."

"But there has to be *some* constraints on him," the reporter pressed.

"Well, sure," Budge said, sweeping an arm out. "All of *you*. If I've learned anything in my years of public service, it's that the press can lift the lowliest to the heavens and drop the mightiest into the gutter. If Everson gets out of line, why, just crack him with a critical column or two. That'll straighten him up."

Relieved laughter broke around a fresh burst of questions. But when Budge turned enough for me to see his face, there was no humor in his eyes.

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"Thanks for being such a good sport," Budge said, settling behind his office desk. "Can I get you anything?"

"How about some makeup remover?" I grumbled.

I dropped the hat and balled-up cape onto a coffee table and sagged into a deep leather chair across from him. The press conference had gone on for another thirty minutes. Thirty interminable minutes in which I'd stood there, a stage prop, while Budge rattled off superlatives about his program.

It only strengthened my determination to resign.

"You wanted to talk?" Budge pulled out his smartphone and began thumbing through the messages.

"I'm out," I said.

"Hm?" He raised his eyebrows without looking up.

"I'm resigning from the program."

The mayor's eyes joined his brows. "Resigning? What are you talking about?"

"I asked for discretion. That was one of the conditions for my participation. You nodded and said, 'Mum's the word.' Do you remember that? Well, mum apparently left the building and got run over by a truck."

"Hey, I'm sorry," Budge said, showing his hands. "I got a little enthusiastic."

"A little enthusiastic? You outed me to every major news network in the metropolitan area. And what was that little stage production just now?"

"I was trying to take the pressure off you."

"By making me a Broadway extra?"

Budge set his forearms on the desk. "Look, I should've warned you I was bringing in the news crews yesterday. And, yeah, things got a little dicey there with the ghouls getting out and all—but listen to me. Capturing that final battle on film? You can't pay for coverage like that. And it's exactly what New Yorkers need to see—that there *are* monsters out there, and we're fighting 'em. Did you catch today's poll numbers? I jumped four points overnight. Four points! The race is a dead heat." He laughed in disbelief.

"Good, so you don't need me anymore."

"Don't need you?" His mouth straightened. "You're the face of this thing."

"No, I'm not."

"You heard the press out there—they love you."

"Right, and that's the whole point," I said. "I don't want the attention."

"What about our deal?"

He was referring to the protection from Penny, should she awaken. But as I looked on Budge's wavering brown eyes, I knew I'd been kidding myself. The man didn't wield that kind of power. Penny would have her retribution whether I helped the mayor win or not.

"I'll take my chances," I said.

"Well, gosh." Budge sat back. "I'd hate to think what would happen if the press decided you weren't working in the public's best interest, that you *were* dangerous."

Heat prickled over my face. "Is that a threat?"

"Hey, I just know reporters. They're a bunch of jackals. You stop giving them what they want, and pretty soon they start digging for the bad stuff. Past arrests. Shady associations…"

The son of a bitch *was* threatening me. He was saying that if I didn't remain on board, he would make sure the press knew about my indiscretions, including my arrest for murder two years earlier. And as went the press, so would go public opinion. Fear and anger stormed inside me.

"Well, maybe they'll learn some interesting things about the mayor's office, too," I said through gritted teeth. "Such as Penny's true nature."

Budge shrugged. "It'll be your word against ours. And my wife can't very well speak for herself." He nodded past me. I turned my head and observed a back wall heaped with floral baskets and bouquets. "Those arrived today. All for Penny. The volume's down from the spring, but we still can't get them to the Dumpster fast enough. That Caroline is brilliant. Too bad you let her slip away."

"Caroline?" I said in confusion. "What does she have to do with this?"

"You didn't know?" he said, sweeping hair from his glasses. "She's been advising me."

"Advising you?"

"Yeah, ever since Penny's hospitalization."

That explained what she'd been doing at City Hall, what she had meant by *You came*. I knew she had been negotiating with the mayor for the fae's access to the portal in lower Manhattan, but advising him? I looked back at the pile of flowers and weighed the mayor's

remark.

"Wait," I said, "the sympathy campaign was *her* idea?"

"And it's worked like a charm," Budge said. "She came up with the eradication program, too."

"The eradication program?" I stood and paced a circle around the chairs in front of his desk. The revelations were coming in too hard, too fast. By my second circuit, I started molding them into something sensible. The fae kingdoms Caroline served were anxious to maintain control over the lower portal. If Budge's opponent in the mayoral race, Abby Azonka, couldn't or wouldn't cotton to the idea, the fae had to ensure Budge's reelection. Whoever advised him would need an expertise in New York politics as well as a strong connection to the mayor's office—Caroline offered both, the second through her father, one of the mayor's attorneys.

In essence, *she* was the reason the information Vega and I once wielded over the mayor's office was no longer effective. "Was hiring me as a consultant also Caroline's idea?" I asked bitterly.

"She was against it, actually," Budge said. "Didn't say why, though."

I gave a begrudging nod, remembering her warnings, including her most recent one about seeing a lot more than I could. I assumed she'd been referring to her fae powers, but now I wondered. As advisor to the mayor, had she already worked out the contingencies? Seen a looming threat?

"So why did you come looking for me?" I asked.

"I went to that detective first. What's her name?" He circled a hand. "The one who was with you when you visited my mansion in the spring?"

"Vega?"

He snapped his fingers and pointed at me. "Yeah, that's the one. Anyway, I was told Vega took on supernatural cases in Homicide. She was the one who insisted you be brought in."

I stopped pacing. Why in the hell would Vega want me involved in the eradication program? I remembered the dismissive way she'd dealt with me at the crime scene, the bitter look she'd given me in the auditorium.

"Did she say why?" I asked.

"Well, she said she'd help out however she could, but for the scale of the operations we were talking, we really needed someone of your caliber. You know, a magic-user who understood the threats, knew the monsters' weaknesses, how best to go after them, so on and so forth."

So *Vega* was the one who had told the mayor about my work.

"But to tell you the truth," he continued, "I think she just wanted to make sure you got the same deal."

“What deal?”

“Extra protection in the event someone woke up.” He laced his fingers behind his neck and grinned, evidently pleased at how the conversation had come full circle. “Funny how you asked the same for Vega.”

I sat down again, my head starting to throb.

“Look at it this way,” Budge said, buddy-buddy again. “You’ve got one friend who came up with the idea for the program and another who insisted on you being a part of it. Both of them are drop-dead gorgeous to boot,” he added with a laugh. “How can you say no to that?”

“Just shut up for a minute.”

I massaged my closed eyes. I had to think, but the only thing striking through was Budge’s threat to use the media to turn public opinion against me. And with the city’s growing bloodlust for nasty supernaturals, I’d be a walking target. Unless, of course, I aligned with Arnaud or took up Caroline’s offer to hide in her world. Both nonstarters.

“Fine,” I said, opening my eyes. “I’ll stay in the program.”

At least until I can figure out something else, I thought.

“You’re making the right decision.”

“But on one condition,” I added.

“What’s that?”

I picked up the cape from the coffee table and wiped my brow, smearing copper makeup over the fabric. I moved on to my nose, cheeks, and finally my lips and jaw before tossing the soiled cape onto the mayor’s desk.

“Keep me out of your damned press conferences.”

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"When in Diablo's name is someone coming to fix the air conditioner?" Tabitha asked, sauntering into my lab and hopping onto the table.

"We're still on the waiting list," I answered distractedly, motioning for her to move away from the casting circle. I squinted at the circle from another angle and added more silver filings to the far side.

"That doesn't answer my question," she said.

I had returned to the apartment, relieved to find Tabitha fast asleep in front of the box fan, her belly swollen from the tuna steak I'd set out for her earlier. Now I regretted not spiking her lunch with Xanax.

"If not this weekend then next, all right?" I said with a sigh. "The brownout fried a ton of AC systems in the neighborhood. Now can you leave me alone? I have something important to do."

Tabitha made a dramatic noise and plopped down at the end of the table. Shed hair blew off in tufts around her. "Have you given any more thought to Caroline's offer?"

"No," I said thinly, picking strands of orange hair from the casting circle.

"Just think. We could be in that wonderful realm right now instead of melting in this hell hole."

I ignored her, my eyes moving between the casting circle and an illustration in the book I'd propped open. The book was a crumbling tome that protected a caster against powerful demonic attacks. Not knowing the origin of the sulfurous residue Hoffman had given me, I couldn't afford to take any chances. The casting circle featured two concentric circles with extra sigils of protection. I stooped and fixed a blemish in the outer circle.

Tabitha made a scoffing sound. "Men and their wounded egos."

She was still talking about Caroline. I bristled. "This doesn't have anything to do with my ego."

"Ooh. Touchy, touchy."

"Just let it go," I said. "I need to concentrate."

"You saw her today, didn't you?"

I glanced over, in spite of myself. "What makes you say that?"

“I know that hot and bothered look.”

“I saw her briefly,” I admitted, hoping that would be enough to satisfy Tabitha. I should have known better.

“I told you she’s trying to get up close and personal.”

“It was a chance encounter outside City Hall,” I said. “She was leaving a meeting with the mayor as I was arriving.”

“And what did she say?”

“Same old, same old.”

Even as I waved a dismissive hand, Caroline’s warnings continued to echo in my head. *You’re standing on a precipice, Everson. And it’s crumbling.* As one of the chief architects of Budge’s reelection campaign, she was seeing something that I couldn’t. But what?

“Hmm. Perhaps I was wrong,” Tabitha said in a musing voice.

“About what?”

“While I wouldn’t put it past her to claim you were in danger in order to get closer to you…”

“You don’t even know her.”

“…her persistence in the face of so hopeless a case makes me wonder now.” Tabitha propped her chin on a curled paw. “Perhaps you should take her at her word. You might *actually* be in danger.”

“We’re not going to the faerie buffet.”

“It’s not about food,” she said, then added, “not entirely.”

I met Tabitha’s gaze. Was my cat right? Was refusing to listen to Caroline my way of retaliating for her choosing a life with Angelus and the fae over me? Was I jeopardizing my safety to prove to Caroline that I could take care of myself, that I didn’t need her help?

“All right,” I admitted, “maybe ego has a tiny bit to do with this, but it’s not the whole story.” I lifted my satchel onto the table and pulled out the evidence bag with the cat hair. “I need to stay here to figure out the whos and whys of Lady Bastet’s murder. The answer might not only have implications for me, but also Detective Vega.” I was still puzzling over Vega recommending me for the eradication team. Had it been to protect me, as the mayor suggested?

“Well, the *whos* are the wolves, correct?” Tabitha asked.

“Huh?” I said, emerging from my thoughts. “Oh, I’m not so sure. I had a little run-in with them earlier, and they showed impressive restraint. They would rip me to shreds if left to their instincts, but someone’s got a tight hold on their leashes. And they have a hell of a lot more reason to kill me than to kill Lady Bastet.”

“What about the mauled cats?” Tabitha asked.

I considered the mystic’s disabled warding glyphs, the lack of signs of struggle. Finally, I considered the evidence bag in front of me: sulfur lifted from the torn necks of her cats. “I’m starting to think the real killer *wanted* the murder to look like the work of wolves.”

“What in the world for?”

“That’s what I’m hoping to find out,” I said. “So either keep quiet or go back to your cat bed.”

Muttering something about crappy ice bags, Tabitha remained in a languid heap on my table. She lowered her head to her paws. I waited another moment to ensure she would stay silent before I opened the plastic bag and emptied the contents into the casting circle. Stepping into my protective circle on the floor, I drew my staff and called energy to my prism.

“Cerrare,” I said.

Energy infused the sigils and moved around the concentric circles, closing them. Brow furrowed, I concentrated toward the cat hair. My first spell would be a simple detection spell to determine the nature of the residue, to learn what sort of being had deposited it.

“Rivelare,” I said, staff pointed at the circle.

The hair swirled and amassed at the circle’s center. In the next moment, small popping noises sounded, and a yellow smoke drifted from the clump of hair. The sulfurous smell intensified, but now it carried something else: a distinct odor of ozone. That went with casting.

“The residue originated from a spell,” I said.

“And not from a demonic spell,” Tabitha put in.

“No?” I hadn’t progressed that far.

“I have a nose for my own. That carries the taint of human.”

“Black magic, then.” I gave another sniff, opening my wizard’s senses further. “Cast from elder wood.”

I withdrew energy from the detection spell. *A fellow magic-user.* And if he or she had disabled Lady Bastet’s glyphs and killed her without a struggle, then we were talking about a powerful one. Personal enmity between the mage and the mystic? Maybe, but I didn’t like the timing.

“Let’s do a little hunting,” I said.

“Knock yourself out,” Tabitha murmured.

With a spoken Word, I shifted half the hair to one side of the circle as a reserve and kept the other half in the circle’s center. I aimed my staff at the small pile and incanted.

After several moments, a subtle pull took hold on my cane as it began to absorb the residue’s essence. The pull grew stronger, which was a relief. I’d feared the mage had covered his tracks and that the spell would crap out. That he hadn’t cast a spell to avoid detection suggested the mage either wasn’t as powerful as I’d thought or so powerful that he didn’t care.

“I see you.”

I jumped at the distorted voice. My gaze searched the circle, but

there was no one and nothing there. To the circle's right, Tabitha had shuffled back into a threatening crouch. Her hair was puffed out, ears flat to her skull. But her dilated eyes weren't aimed at the circle. They were glaring at me.

"Yes," she said, "I see you, *Everson Croft*."

"Tabitha?"

But it wasn't Tabitha. A hunting spell worked like a plumbing snake, reaching through the essence of something to hook a target. But that conduit ran both ways, enabling an adept target to lash back and hook the casting circle. Which was exactly what had happened. The minute I knew we weren't dealing with a demon, I should have reconfigured the circle. Not only that, but I'd been careless in removing Tabitha's errant hairs. A few must have remained inside the circle, allowing the mage to take possession of my cat.

I cycled through Word after Word to break the hunting spell, but Tabitha's lips only forked into a grin.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"I *was* of no concern to you, Everson Croft," the mage said through Tabitha.

"How do you know my name?"

"I know a lot about you. I own something vital of yours."

The confidence with which the mage spoke sent a cold shudder through me. What in the world was he talking about?

"Leave it, Everson," he warned, "or you will join others who have waded into matters beyond their purview. Indeed, crossing paths with me a second time would be *very* bad luck."

He was speaking as though in riddle. *Bad luck* and *crossing paths* called to mind black cats. And *a second time*?

In a sudden flash, I remembered the cat that had darted out when I'd blown open Lady Bastet's door. I had assumed the cat with the sleek midnight coat to have been the lone survivor of the massacre, but something told me the feline hadn't belonged to Lady Bastet.

Had I crossed paths with the departing mage?

To test the theory, I said, "You killed Lady Bastet."

Tabitha's black eyes moved back and forth over mine. At last, her lips grinned again. "You're more astute than you appear," the mage said. "But don't mistake astuteness for adeptness. You're still a babe in the woods."

The satisfaction in the mage's voice stoked a raw rage inside me. Without forethought, I called a tidal wave of power to my prism. *"Uccidere!"* I shouted, unleashing the power through the conduit, the force shoving me backwards. Tabitha recoiled too, eyes startling wide.

A moment later, though, her body shook with laughter.

"You're a tempestuous one," the mage said. "It looks like you

require a more tactile warning."

Before I could raise my staff, Tabitha sprang, claws flashing. Her rear legs kicked me in the chest, toppling me backwards. Hot tines raked my right cheek. I landed hard, cracking my head against the edge of a bookshelf. The room blurred as I struck out my arms in defense.

"Are you all right, darling?"

I blinked over to where Tabitha was sauntering up. I started to shrink away before sensing she was herself again. A quick check showed me the hunting spell had been broken.

Tabitha's pupils narrowed inside her green irises as she leaned down to inspect my cheek. "Who did you manage to piss off this time?"

"A mage," I replied, understanding that Tabitha had no memory of the possession.

I touched the knot on the back of my head and inspected my fingers. I wasn't bleeding there, anyway. My face was another matter. I looked down at the blood spattering the thigh of my pants. The claw marks felt deep enough to leave scars, even with healing magic. No doubt the mage's intention. I drew a handkerchief from my pocket, balled it up, and pressed it to my cheek. I then used the bookcase to pull myself to my feet.

"So the hunting spell was a score?" Tabitha asked.

"Not quite," I said. "The mage was too powerful. He let the spell go just long enough to issue a warning."

"Seems you've been getting a lot of those lately."

"No shit," I muttered. "This one was to keep my nose out of Lady Bastet's murder—which the mage all but confessed to."

I limped back to my lab table and looked down at the smoking casting circle. I thought about the shriveled strand of hair the investigators had found on Lady Bastet's lap. If it had belonged to my mother, as I suspected, maybe it explained the timing of the murder.

I repeated the mage's warning in a whisper: "Leave it, Everson, or you will join *others* who have waded into matters beyond their purview."

"What, darling?" Tabitha asked.

…*matters beyond their purview,* I repeated to myself.

I turned toward Tabitha, speaking quickly. "All this time I've been thinking the murder had to do with the wolves or the mayor's office. But what if the mage killed Lady Bastet for what she'd learned?"

"What in the world are you talking about?" she asked in irritation.

I thought back to the murder scene. The toppled shelves, the decapitated cats, Lady Bastet's slit throat, and in front of her … the scrying globe! If Lady Bastet had been killed at the conclusion of the

divination session, the final images she received might still be in the globe.

I slotted my sword into my staff, grabbed several spell items from my drawers, and made for the ladder.

“Where are you going?” Tabitha asked.

“To ignore a warning,” I said.

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I descended the steps to Lady Bastet's former business and found the door secured by a police padlock. I drew my sword and inserted the tip inside the shackle. With a whispered *"Vigore,"* I cracked one of the shafts from the body and slipped it from the hasp.

I opened the door. Inside, afternoon light fell through the high basement windows in dusty slants. The showroom was clean, the hanging rugs gone, probably in a forensics lab somewhere. For a panicked moment, I became certain the scrying globe would be gone too.

After sensing no one else inside, I sealed the door behind me with a basic locking spell and hurried to the windowless back room. I called light to my staff and exhaled. The globe was there, on the table. The rest of the room had been straightened, shelves righted, the items that had fallen from them swept into a pile. Blood stains still marred the floor, though.

I returned my gaze to the scrying globe. It seemed to absorb the light from my staff, giving nothing back. The orb simply stared, a gray, inscrutable eye.

The chair in which I'd found Lady Bastet was scooted out at a slight angle, as though inviting me to sit. I didn't sense any traps, but given the power of the mage, and that he seemed to have anticipated my hunting spell, I built a protective circle around the chair before lowering myself onto the seat.

"All right," I whispered, eyeing the globe. "Let's see if there's anything left in your memory."

I set my sword and staff on the table and pulled two silver candles from my pockets. I lit them and stood them on either side of the globe. Next, I extinguished my staff. As darkness collapsed around the candles, the marble-like surface of the globe shifted. Nothing appeared, though. Scrying required a level of intuition that I lacked, not only to perceive images but to interpret them.

Fortunately, I kept an Elixir of Seeing on hand. It had been drawn from a '48 batch, which was supposed to have been an especially good year. I pulled the flask from my shirt pocket and drank the bitter potion down.

It didn't take long to start working. Within minutes, I began to feel insubstantial, ghost-like. A dull pressure built between my eyes while, from the sides of my vision, a dark mist drifted in. The mist thickened until I could no longer see the candles in front of me. With a final, rude gouge, the pressure in the center of my brow relented, and a third eye opened.

The scrying globe hovered in front of me like a misty planet, larger than it had appeared to my physical eyes. Light from the candles glistened over a surface that had begun to swirl. Images flashed forth, talking to me in a strange language—one I could suddenly understand.

Oh, God.

The images were horrifying. But I was no longer just observing them.

I was living them.

I STAGGERED in the center of a pillared room, a woman, pain seething in every part of my body. The metallic tastes of blood and fear stained my palate. Through hanks of sweat-soaked hair, I could see the burning candles that ringed me. Robed figures stood among them.

"Please," I managed, the word raw in my throat.

Their responding voices rose at once, a single word climbing above the others: "Traitor."

"No," I said, searching for a way out.

A force blast caught me in the chest and knocked me back. Breathless, I stumbled to keep my feet. Another blast nailed me between the shoulder blades, pitching me onto my hands and knees. My right collarbone cracked in a harsh flare, and I moaned. The figures swam toward me.

My son, I thought through the haze. *Need to stay alive for my son.*

"Did you really think you could keep up this shameful duplicity without me finding out?"

I squinted at the tall figure emerging through the others. The face beneath his hood was an ornate gold mask, the eyeholes dark and vacant, open mouth set in a frown. A mask of judgment.

"I did nothing," I said.

The mage's black gown shuffled to a stop in front of me. "Nothing?" he scoffed. "You joined the Front as a sworn rebel against tyranny. You pledged your allegiance, your *life*. Only for us to learn that you're a plant for the Order."

I shook my head. "That's a lie."

The mage drew a wand. I could smell the elder wood. "Then you shouldn't have a problem submitting to a mind flaying."

My insides twisted up. A mind flaying would entail a level of pain beyond anything physically imaginable. It would lay bare everything —not only my infiltration of the Front, but my true feelings for my son. I had acted as if he were a mistake, a nuisance to be tolerated.

Struggling to my feet, I faced the mage. "I will submit to nothing."

"Then you are admitting guilt."

"If that's what you want to believe."

"It's the truth, traitor," he said. "And you know the penalty."

I stared past the eyeholes of his mask, defiant. "Do your worst."

With a grunted Word, he thrust his wand toward me. The force threw me against a stone pillar, knocking the wind from me. He spoke another Word and vines snaked up through cracks in the floor. I was too stunned to move. Could only watch as the vines encircled my legs, my broken body, binding me to the pillar. They wrapped my throat and squeezed until I gagged.

The mage moved closer. "It didn't have to end this way, Eve."

From a great distance, I flinched at hearing my mother's name.

The mage turned toward the other robed figures, fellow magic-users. "Behold the penalty for treachery," he announced. I imagined a hard grin forming behind his mask. "Death by fire."

No, I thought as the woman.

Though my eyes remained fixed on the mage, I saw my son's face. He had just turned one. The week before, he had taken his first steps, spoken his first coherent sentence: *Mama, read me.* Such a smart boy.

A crushing sadness filled my heart at the knowledge he would never know me. Not really. I had already discussed the contingency with my parents. My mother would love him as her own. My father would protect him. The Order would look after him as well…

"Fuoco!" the mage shouted.

Dark red flames sprang up around me and glistened in the mage's gold mask until he looked like something demonic. Soon, the flames hid his face, and there was only pain.

I love you, Everson, I felt my mother's cracking lips whisper.

I LANDED against the cold floor with a gasp. The room was dark, my shirt soaked with sweat. I pawed around until I encountered the stone table and pulled myself to my feet. The globe stood from the darkness, its surface dimming. The candles on either side had burned to their nubs and gone out, the puddles of wax cool and firm when I touched them.

How long was I out?

I stared at the spent candles, remembering the fire from my vision.

It had consumed me. No—consumed my mother. I had relived the agony and sorrow of her final moments, felt her vanishing love for me. The experience—too raw to put into words—tore around my insides.

Arnaud had been telling the truth. I believed now that my grandfather *had* gone to him after my mother's death and said the words, *They killed her. My God, they killed her.* My mother had been murdered by a rebel group she had managed to infiltrate. Had been burned alive by their presumed leader, a mage with a gold mask whose voice I recognized.

A scuff sounded from the showroom.

I seized my sword and cane from the table and spun. The sun had set while I'd been entranced; the showroom was now cast in dark shadows. Another scuff sounded: someone trying to exercise stealth. Either the locking magic on the front door had petered out or someone had dispelled it.

Heart slamming, I moved to one side of the door in the rear room and pressed my back to the wall. My mother's executioner was still alive. He had murdered Lady Bastet to keep his deed a secret. He had hijacked my hunting spell and spoken through Tabitha to warn me not to pursue the matter. That was where I'd recognized the mage's voice from.

Another scuff.

My lips trembled in fury as I summoned energy to my prism. *You screwed with the wrong wizard family, you son of a bitch. Whatever happens, you're going to know pain. Even if it kills me.*

A dark shape entered the doorway.

"Entrapolarle!" I bellowed, swinging my staff around.

White light burst from the opal, and a crackling shield encased a figure. I slammed the figure against the near wall and raised my sword overhead. The sound of muted gunshots stayed my arm. As the shield dimmed, I found myself staring at Detective Vega. She stared back with startled eyes.

"Croft?" she shouted, eyebrows crushing down.

I released her and called light to my staff. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"No," she said, emerging through the sparks of the dissolving shield, "that's *my* question."

I glanced back at the globe before meeting her gaze. "I was looking for something."

"You *broke* in here," she said.

"Yeah."

The confession seemed to catch her off guard. Her dark eyes searched my face, pausing on the healing claw marks.

"Do you want to tell me what the hell's going on?" she asked.

With a steadying breath, I sheathed my sword. “It wasn’t the wolves.”

“What?”

“The wolves didn’t kill Lady Bastet.”

“*That’s* what you’re doing in here?” She holstered her firearm and took a menacing step forward. “Listen to me, Croft, and listen good. You may advise the Hundred, but that does *not* give you jurisdiction to investigate any old murder you just happen to take an interest in.”

Fresh anger burned inside me. “Any old murder? Let’s see, a powerful mystic was executed on the same day I just happened to drop off something for her to read. Excuse me for taking a goddamned *interest*.”

“I told you we’d be in touch.”

“Yeah, to blow me off,” I shot back.

“For your information”—Vega jabbed a finger against my chest—“I already eliminated the wolf angle. Nothing linked them to the murder. I moved onto a substance we found on the mutilated cats, but I guess your informant already told you that,” she added with a sneer.

She knew about my arrangement with Hoffman. I steeled my jaw.

“I get that you think I’m a novice when it comes to the supernatural,” she went on, “but I have other resources besides you. The substance came from magic.”

I chafed at the idea of her consulting another magic-user. It felt like betrayal—something I didn’t need any more of in my life. “And what were you going to do with that information?” I challenged. “Stick it in your Wizard Database and look for a match? You’re out of your depth, Vega. You have no idea who or what you’re dealing with.”

“If you’re suggesting you have info,” she said, “you’re obligated to share it.”

I stared back at her. My emotions might have been all over the map, but I knew better than to say anything that would put Vega in the path of a powerful mage. And after what he’d done to my mother, he was *my* problem.

“Forget it.” I stepped past her.

She seized my arm. “I’m serious, Croft. I already have you on breaking and entering.”

My anger spiked, but I talked it back down, forced myself to relax. When at last I spoke, my voice was calm, quiet. “I understand I have you to thank for getting me a spot on the mayor’s eradication team. For protection, right? I appreciate that. I do. And if you want to continue to keep me at arm’s length, fine. That’s probably being a good mother. But I’m not going to stop pursuing Lady Bastet’s killer. How you deal with that is up to you.”

I drew my arm from her relenting grip and walked from the back

room.

"The problem with you, Croft, is I never know who I'm dealing with."

I turned and found her standing in the back doorway, fists on her hips.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

"It means that I was ready to put the past behind us—only to find out you're dealing with Arnaud again."

"Arnaud? I don't have a goddamned thing to do with him."

"Oh yeah? You didn't meet with one of his at a bar in the West Village last week?"

She was referring to the morning of the mayor's press conference. That had only been ten or so days ago, but with everything that had transpired since, it felt like ten months. I'd relegated it to the back of my mind. *Explains Vega's ball-breaking stance towards me, though,* I thought.

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"That doesn't sound like a denial."

I sighed. "It's not what you think. Meeting with him was part of a deal for him to stay out of my life."

"Yeah, I know all about your *deals.*"

Of course she did. The last one had led to her son getting grabbed. I cursed my word choice, but there was way too much going on in my head right now. I needed to leave. I surprised myself by walking back toward her.

"Look," I said, "Arnaud is always shifting pieces around his little chess board, looking for advantages. It's how he's stayed alive this long. But I know his game. I gave him ten minutes of my time. That was all. True to his word, he hasn't approached me since. And if I know vampires, he won't."

Vega was looking at me as though trying to decide what to make of me. In hindsight, agreeing to meet with one of Arnaud's had been stupid. I glanced past her to the stains on the floor.

"It's not like I gave him my blood or anyth…" My voice trailed off as a horrifying thought struck me.

"What's wrong?" Vega asked.

"The blood in the room," I said, nodding past her. "You had it tested?"

She looked over her shoulder and back at me. "Yeah?"

"Did any of it…" I swallowed. "…belong to me?"

Vega's brow beetled as she shook her head.

The room seemed to reel as I recalled the mage's words: *I know a lot about you. I own something vital of yours.* The black cat that darted out Lady Bastet's front door hadn't been wearing an odd collar. It had

been holding the clay tube with my blood.

"Shit," I spat.

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I spent the next day in my apartment, afraid to leave my protective wards, not even sure they *could* protect me. The mage who had killed my mother had my blood, and that was bad. Super bad. With it, he could cast all manner of blood magic, up to and including a death spell.

I would be powerless to stop him.

I paced the length of my bookshelves again, eyes jerking from title to title, but I'd already pulled the relevant ones and read through them. They only reaffirmed what I already knew about blood magic.

I was fucked.

I sagged into my padded chair with a hard sigh and eyed the evidence bag beside the books on my desk. The bag held what remained of the cat hair and spell residue—my sole connection to the mage. I had mentally cycled through the spells I was capable of casting, but I was still too junior. None of them would enable me to find the mage or strike him without his knowledge. And if the mage was as adept as he seemed, he probably had a nasty counterspell in waiting.

That left communicating with the Order—and that was where I was stuck.

First, there were the questions. Why didn't the Order have a record of my mother? Were they trying to hide something? And why hadn't the Order done anything about her murder? The mage should have been toast. Was he that powerful, or was there something more going on?

Complication number two fell back on my blood. The mage had taken it without my consent, true. But that wouldn't earn me any pity points with the Order. The fact I had given my blood willingly, to whomever, was what mattered. If the mage used my blood in any kind of black magic, I would be considered just as guilty as he was. In which case, the only way I'd be spared the death penalty was if the mage killed me first.

I massaged my closed eyes, the final moments of my mother's life flashing behind my swollen lids. The pain, the blasts, the mage with the gold mask, the bitter exchange, the cruel fire—

The ringing phone made me jump.

I considered letting the call go to my answering service, but I was selective about who I shared my unlisted number with, and this could be important. I arrived downstairs and grabbed the receiver on the fifth ring.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Everson!" the mayor said. "Listen, I know we barely touched on it in our meeting yesterday, but I want you to go ahead and start drawing up plans for the next phase in the program."

"Central Park?" That had been slated for late August.

Budge lowered his voice. "Between you and me, I was hoping for a solid month of coverage on the ghoul operation, but the press is already running out of steam. We're looking at another week, tops. They want fresh stories on the program. Maybe we can divide up the park, do it in phases?"

"We'd have to," I said, considering not only its size, but its creatures.

"Yeah, maybe a series of grab-and-hold operations," Budge said. "We could even reopen parts of the park, host a big cookout with blankets, clowns, the works—you know, something tangible for the public. Don't get me wrong. Ridding the lines of the ghouls was great, but it's gonna take months to get those lines in good enough shape to run trains through again."

I caught myself nodding. Despite that Budge had all but blackmailed me into pledging my continued cooperation, I was thankful to have another problem to divert my thoughts.

"All right, but listen," I said. "This is going to be a lot different from the ghoul operation. For one, we're dealing with a different class of creature. Goblins, hobgoblins—bad, bad dudes. They might not have the regenerative powers of ghouls, but they're smarter, more tactical minded. Also, we won't have anything like the subway tunnels. This is going to be jungle warfare."

"Is that a problem?" Budge asked.

"It is if you're trying to avoid casualties."

"Hmm, good point," Budge said. "At this phase, though, I think the public would be willing to stomach a few losses, don't you? Shows them we're taking the problem seriously. Just so long as the losses are minimal and they don't include you. You're still the face of this thing, remember."

I let the remark go. "When do you need a plan by?"

"Have something Friday. If we want to maintain campaign momentum, Caroline's saying we need to get the ball rolling by the following week. Otherwise, I'm bleeding points again."

Mention of Caroline sent a raw charge of emotion through me. I

wondered vaguely about the looming threat she was seeing. In light of recent developments, it didn't seem so pressing.

I cleared my throat. "Friday it is, then."

I still had the mage to worry about, and whether or not to tell the Order, but in my years as a scholar I'd found that shifting my focus to a secondary problem often yielded answers to a more pressing primary problem. Subconscious incubation, I'd heard it called. I hoped that would be the case here.

"The more spectacular, the better," Budge said, and hung up.

A WEEK later found me pacing the command-and-control center's main tent, gripping a Styrofoam cup of bitter coffee. All around me, NYPD officers and technicians manned computers and communication equipment. For the second phase of the eradication program, we had set up in Grand Army Plaza, just outside Central Park's southeast corner. As before, Captain Cole wanted us close to the action. Only this time, there *was* no action.

Across the tent, he shot me a stern look that said, *Where are they?*

I dropped my Styrofoam cup into a trashcan. Above me, a series of monitors showed grainy green images of woods, overgrown paths, a derelict amusement park—but no creatures. On the GPS display, the numbered points indicated that the sweep, begun at midnight, was nearly complete.

"Well?" Cole asked, voicing his displeasure now.

"It's only the first action," I said defensively. We had divided Central Park into six sections with the plan to clear them in successive actions, south to north. Tonight we were tackling the southernmost section, up to the transverse road at Sixty-fifth Street. While half the Hundred performed the sweep, the other half were stationed around the perimeter in armored vehicles. No creature was going to get out alive. That had been the idea, anyway.

Cole walked up to me. "You said we'd get engagement."

"I said *maybe* we'd get engagement. I'm an academic, remember? Qualifiers are our stock and trade. I also said the heaviest concentration of creatures was going to be farther north. Either way, we secure the southern park and the mayor gets to throw his cookout. Everyone's fat and happy, right?"

"This is about liberating, not securing," Cole said in a menacing voice. "You don't liberate a place by strolling through it and shouting 'all clear.' The local Cub Scout troop could've managed that."

"Good," I said, turning away. "Consult their den mother next time."

Cole seized my wrist. “You know what I’m saying, Prof.”

I felt my other fist balling around my cane. It was late, my nerves were stretched, and—qualifiers or not—the operation was *not* going as planned. And here Cole was trying to make me the scapegoat. Monitors flickered. Cole must have sensed the crackle of magic too because he released my wrist.

“Look,” he said, “I hate the political B.S. as much as you, but it is what it is.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I said, a sigh dispersing the power that had rushed to my prism. “The press needs a monster count. Otherwise, this is going to look like an expensive publicity stunt—one the mayor’s opponent will jump on as yet another example of his reckless spending.”

“How dangerous would it be to send a team north to try to bag a few bodies?” he asked.

I followed his furrowed gaze to the map of Central Park. It was a large aerial shot that should have answered his question. The further north one ventured, the wilder and more rugged the park became—and thus, the more dangerous. I’d only ventured into those wilds once, and that was with a stealth potion. Even then, I’d nearly been flame-broiled by druids.

“Not worth it,” I said.

“Team of five,” Cole went on. “If they’re killed in action, not a huge loss.”

“It is if we have nothing to show for it.”

But the stern line of the captain’s lips told me he’d already made up his mind. He readied his headset to issue the command.

“We found something,” a voice crackled over the feed.

Cole and I turned simultaneously. The GPS display showed team members converging near the park’s southeast corner—a wooded area anchored by a horseshoe-shaped pond. My eyes cut to the nearby monitors. One of the feeds steadied on the base of a giant boulder. Several armored officers were clearing branches away from what I realized was the entrance to a tunnel.

“Careful,” I muttered.

Cole nodded. “Drop in a couple grenades,” he ordered.

As team members readied the grenades, I studied the tossed-off branches that had been used to screen the tunnel. Something about the concealment seemed too obvious. I eyed the GPS display. In the men’s eagerness for action, they had converged too quickly, were too close together.

“Have them spread apart,” I told Cole quickly. “There are probably other access points to the—”

The bangs of the exploding grenades cut me off. Fire blew from the

hole, the retreating camera catching it as a white-green flare. The camera whipped around suddenly.

I drew in a sharp breath at the sight of small figures blurring past the trees. Thunks sounded, and the camera fell to the ground. Out ahead of the camera lens, beyond a spray of twigs, I could see two downed members of the Hundred, the seams in their body armor bristling with arrows.

A blow horn sounded, followed by a chorus of garbled cries.

“Son of a bitch,” I said, instinctively drawing my cane apart. “Goblins.”

“We have engagement!” Cole shouted into his headset. “I repeat, we have engagement!”

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Unlike many of the creatures in the city, Goblins were not undead. Neither were they descended from the original demons. They had come up from the faerie realm in an age before fae kingdoms controlled the portals. Passing for stunted humans, they were a mean, marauding race. They never adopted modern weaponry, however, and were eventually killed or driven into hiding. But their love of human treasure kept them close to urban centers.

Several of the monitors showed small figures cutting in and out of view, pursued by bursts of gunfire. Arrows flashed at cameras in a deadly hail. Though more likely to pilfer than plunder these days, the goblins' skill in battle had never left them.

"They're everywhere," a team leader called through one of the feeds. *"Coming from all sides!"*

"Everyone to the southeast quadrant," Cole ordered. "Perimeter team, move in."

"We don't know how many there are," I said. "There could be hundreds."

"That's not what you told us at the briefing," Cole growled.

I stammered for a moment, but he was right. I'd told him and the mayor that we could expect a few dozen creatures, a number I'd extrapolated from the statistics on murders and attacks in and around south Central Park.

When I found my voice, I said, "So we pull back, reassess."

"We've got personnel pinned down," Cole answered. "They need backup."

A nauseous heat broke out over my face. "There's no telling how far the goblin tunnels extend. You could be sending your forces into a bigger trap."

Cole ignored me, shouting more commands into his headset as he moved off.

I looked from my inert sword and staff to the frenzy of activity around me. On the monitors, more helmet-mounted cameras were staring at the ground or up into trees, their operators dead or dying. I'd underestimated the number of goblins. Underestimated their cunning. Once the sweep team had converged on the poorly hidden

hole—a decoy, no doubt—the goblins had poured from surrounding holes and launched an ambush. And something told me the goblins had a second ambush in waiting for whatever backup arrived.

We were playing into their grubby little hands.

"Entering from Central Park South," I heard a familiar voice report over one of the feeds.

Vega?

I ran over to where Cole was standing in front of the GPS display, barking coordinates. "You sent Detective Vega out there?" I asked.

He pushed me aside with a forearm and leaned over one of the communication technicians seated at a computer. He said something into his ear that I couldn't hear.

"Hey!" I grabbed Cole's shoulder. "I asked you a question."

"She's on the perimeter team," he shouted. "We were short one."

I was about to ask why in the hell he'd put her on the perimeter team when I remembered something else I'd said at the briefing. The perimeter team would be unlikely to see major action. They would be in place as a containing force. I swore and sprinted toward the tent door.

"Prof!" Cole shouted. "I can't let you go out there!"

Yeah, I know, I thought cynically. *I'm the face of this thing. But I'm also the reason for the current clusterfuck.*

"Tell your team not to shoot at the white light," I shouted back.

I broke out into a humid, halogen-suffused night and took a moment to orient myself. Armed NYPD officers stood around the perimeter of the plaza. A block away, news vans huddled. Voices rose in earnest at my appearance, and several cameras aimed their lenses at me.

"How's it going so far, Mr. Croft?" a reporter called.

"Will you be joining the action?" another one wanted to know.

Awful, and I don't have a choice.

I wheeled toward the distant popping of semi-automatic gunfire. Vega had said she was joining the combat from Central Park South, a street that bordered the bottom of the rectangular park. Police officers shouted after me as I left the plaza and accessed the street at a run. At the next block, I jumped a police barricade across a stone staircase and descended into the park itself.

"Protezione!" I said.

White light burst from my staff and hardened into a shield around me. I would stand out, but I would also be protected from both friendly and enemy fire—assuming the goblins weren't bearing magical weapons.

The steep staircase deposited me onto a busted-up asphalt path. Trees pressed in from all sides. More gunfire sounded ahead of me.

Away to my left, I picked up a burst of goblin speech.

"Vega!" I called.

Arrows clattered off my shield.

Shit. I reinforced my protection and plowed into the woods ahead. Leafy limbs batted at my shield. I stumbled over something and went down. I knew without looking that it was a body.

Please don't let it be hers, I thought desperately.

I turned and held up my staff. White light illuminated a row of small sharp teeth and the staring squash-colored eyes of a goblin. Its muscled torso had been ripped open by gunfire. Beyond the black talons of an outstretched hand rested the creature's short bow. I hesitated for a moment, never having seen a goblin up close. Even in death it looked menacing.

Another hail of arrows got me moving. By the growing volume of goblin chatter, I guessed more were emerging from underground—just as I'd feared. Gunfire answered in staccato bursts.

"Fall back!" I shouted. "Fall back!"

But a fresh series of horn blasts obscured my cries.

I saw the next body before I could trip over it. One of ours this time. With a force invocation, I rolled the body onto its back, arrow shafts cracking beneath the weight. I let out a relieved breath even as my stomach clenched at the sight of the young man's lifeless face.

I pulled the helmet from his head, donned it, and activated the communication system. "This is Everson Croft," I said. "We're outnumbered. I'm ordering everyone to fall back. I repeat, I'm ordering everyone—"

Feedback blew into my ears, and the power box exploded. I swore and tossed the smoking helmet aside. Cupping my hands to the sides of my mouth, I shouted for Vega again.

Behind me, something broke through the brush.

I turned and nearly screamed. The hairy giant that loomed over me grunted, pointed ears flattening back from a short brow and huge red eyes. *Bugbear,* a voice stammered in my head. *It's a frigging bugbear.* Eyewitnesses frequently mistook the creature for a bigfoot—an easy mistake to make. Only a bigfoot didn't brain its victims and tear them limb from limb.

From a fanged mouth, the creature let out a horrid cry.

I raised my sword, but the shock of the encounter had cost me the precious second I'd needed to cast. Muscles hardened across the bugbears hairy torso and a club came crashing toward me.

I criss-crossed my sword and staff in front of me at the same moment the club collided into my shield. Sparks blew against my face, and the impact hurled me backwards. I ricocheted from tree to tree like a giant pinball. At last, I crashed to a stop. The woods reeled

around me as I sat up, but the glimmering shield had held, sparing my life.

"Not gonna survive a second round, though," I mumbled.

I chanted quickly to reinforce the shield. The bugbear screamed again, limbs breaking with his next charge. Too soon, his fierce red eyes shone above me, club raised overhead.

"Respingere!" I called.

The pulse from my shield knocked the bugbear onto his heels. Without my feet planted, the counterforce sent me backwards. The shield and I broke through a sweep of reeds, and then we were … bobbing?

Oh, you've got to be kidding me.

The shield fizzled and burst apart. Warm water soaked through my clothes. I splashed until I was standing shin deep in the muddy shallows of a pond, my sleeves dripping wet.

Beyond the tall reeds, the bugbear unleashed another scream.

I waded across the finger of water at the pond's tapering end and splashed onto the opposite shore.

"Protezione," I tried.

Brown light popped around the staff's opal before blinking out.

I peeked back through the reeds. In the faint moonlight, I could see the rustling trees that marked the bugbear's progress. I took several crouching steps backwards before the sounds of gunfire and goblin chatter stopped me. Escaping the bugbear meant fleeing into the heart of combat. Without my protection, I wouldn't make it ten yards before an arrow or bullet found me.

But I had to locate Vega. Had to get everyone out of the park.

Red eyes appeared above the reeds. They shifted from side to side before narrowing in on me. A low growl rumbled across the water. I readied my sword, but I wasn't dealing with a fire-soaked ghoul. This creature was at full strength and had all of his senses. I would get one thrust or swing. Anything short of a lethal result, and I was looking at an express train to the afterlife.

Yeah, screw that.

I turned and ran. I'd take my chances in the combat zone—and take Harry here with me. The bugbear crashed into the water at my back. With any luck, he would eat bullets before I ate arrows. Right now, I was eating a whipping series of tree branches, and they were slowing me down. I panted out a Word of protection, but no shield would take shape.

Something whistled near my head. An arrow.

"Vega!" I called, more from desperation now than anything.

"Croft," she shouted back.

My heart jerked, and I veered toward her voice. She was alive! My

new route took me around and down the hillock I'd been ascending. I scrambled and slid past massive boulders.

"Vega," I repeated.

"Over here," she said.

I found her in a protected pocket where three boulders came together. She was sitting against the far boulder, aiming an automatic rifle toward the opening. Her helmet was off, and I caught a shine of blood along her hairline. I glanced over my shoulder before crouching beside her.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She winced. "Got clubbed in the head."

"By big, bad, and hairy?"

"I emptied my pistol at it. Not sure whether I hit it or just scared it off. What in the hell was it?"

"A bugbear," I said, looking back again. "And you're lucky. Not many live to tell the tale."

"Yeah, well, I'm not feeling very lucky." She rubbed her right knee, the leg straight out in front of her. "Twisted something when I went down. I can't put any weight on it."

"Where's your helmet?" I asked, searching around. "I need you to contact the others, clear them out."

"The blow cracked it in half. Communication's shot."

"Crap," I muttered. "How are you fixed for ammo?"

From feet away, a scream sounded. Terror threw me in a half spin. The bugbear's silhouette filled the opening to our sanctuary, red eyes pulsing. He screamed again and pumped his club overhead. I raised my sword in a sad effort to parry the inevitable blow.

A deafening burst of gunfire resounded through our space. The bugbear danced like a giant epileptic and fell backwards. He crashed to the ground with a solid *whoomp*.

"Holy crap," I whispered, watching the creature's chest deflate.

"Fully loaded until just then," Vega said, answering my earlier question.

I lowered my sword. "Nice shooting."

"Thanks, but we've got bigger problems."

"Yeah, I know. The goblin horde."

"Worse."

"Worse?" Something gave my gut a hard twist. "What could be worse?"

"Command and control was ordering our evacuation when I lost communication. Cole—"

"Wait," I interrupted. "He ordered your evacuation?" Even as I asked, I realized the only gunfire I was picking up now was sporadic and distant.

Thank God for that.

"He's ordering a napalm strike," Vega finished.

I choked on a fresh fit of panic. "A strike? When?"

But I could already hear the distinctive *bat-bat-bat* of rotary blades. Attack choppers were incoming.

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I now understood why Captain Cole had tried to stop me from leaving the command-and-control tent. He had just ordered his helicopter division to drop a few hundred pounds of liquid hell. It didn't change anything, though. I still would have seen that Vega made it out of the park.

"If I support you, do you think you can stand?" I asked her.

"Not like I have a choice." Gripping the automatic rifle in her left hand, Vega let me underneath her right side and grasped my neck. I wrapped an arm around her upper back, and we stood together.

"The shortest way out is the way I came in," I said.

Vega drew a sharp breath between her teeth as she took her first hopping step. With me stooping and her limping, we made our way down the hillock. With each step, I braced for the sting of an arrow, but none came. I listened for goblins, searched the surrounding trees for their movement. Vega seemed to be doing the same, the rifle aimed from her abdomen. I guessed the thundering of the approaching helicopters had driven them back into hiding.

Vega and I were squelching through the mud around the pond when something heavy crashed away to the west. Another bugbear? The explosion that followed told me no. Fiery light broke through the trees, accompanied seconds later by an intense, oily-smelling heat. Crap, they were dropping the napalm.

"Path is just over there," I panted. "We'll take the stairs out."

The next explosion was closer, the heat like raw blisters over my skin.

Vega grunted as we burst onto the crumbling path. We were paces from the staircase when she staggered. I squeezed her perspiring body to my side to keep her from falling.

She swore. "My good leg's giving out."

"Muscle fatigue," I said, sweat pouring from my own body. I peeked back and beheld an apocalyptic scene. A large swath of park was in black-red flames. The helicopter's first pass had targeted the park's lower west side, but I could hear them circling, coming in from the east. They would drop their remaining tanks in the vicinity of where we were standing.

“Go for it,” Vega said, already knowing what I was planning.

I stooped and placed my shoulder against her stomach. She folded over my back until I could get an arm around her thighs and lift her fireman style. I trudged forward, gaining speed, and hit the staircase at a jog.

“Shit!” she cried.

I thought the jostling motion had hurt her leg until I realized arrows were clattering against the steps around us.

Shit is right, I thought.

I glanced back to see the short, stooped silhouettes of two goblins at the bottom of the steps. I high-stepped as an arrow tore a chunk of fabric off my pant leg. I felt Vega moving her rifle around into a shooting position. I paused at a landing midway up the staircase so she could aim. At the same moment gunfire burst from my back, something knifed into my right calf. I went straight down with a holler. Vega tumbled from my shoulder.

“Nailed them both,” she shouted above the roar of the choppers.

“And one of them nailed me.” I turned my leg over until I could see the dark shaft of the arrow. It was in there good.

“We’ll take care of that once we’re out,” she said, crawling toward the final flight of steps.

When she looked back to make sure I was following, the fire reflected in her eyes showed her fear—not for herself, but for her son. The idea of him growing up motherless. I nodded and crawled after her, remembering the fear and sadness my own mother had felt in her final moments.

Fresh detonations shook the earth. A chopper swept low. More napalm tanks crashed and tumbled into the woods behind us. Too close. We weren’t going to survive their explosions.

I said a quick prayer and shouted, *“Protezione!”*

Light sputtered around my staff’s orb, then, breaking from its water-logged lethargy, came brilliantly to life. The light wrapped us in a spherical shield as fire roared from the woods and engulfed us.

“Respingere!” I cried, channeling the force toward the landing downstairs from us.

In a whoosh of flames, the counterforce launched us into a weightless parabola. We cleared the park and were soon plummeting toward the street. On impact, the sphere shattered into sparks. We rolled over asphalt, my sword and staff clattering away in different directions.

Vega and I came to a rest near the far side of the street. I looked up, road-rashed and reeling. Beyond my splayed legs, fire consumed the lower park and presumably the remaining goblins and bugbears.

I let my head fall back again. “Holy hell.”

Thelonious's creamy white light lapped around the edges of my consciousness, my incubus sensing weakness. I had expended all of my energy with those final invocations. I looked over to where Vega was scooting past me. Using her arms, she lifted herself onto the curb. She sat there without speaking, in shock, firelight glistening over the skin of her face.

"You all right?" I asked.

"I owe you, Croft," she said, her voice distant.

For a moment, I thought she said *I love you*. A conflicting brew of emotions swam through me, casting up strange vapors, until the words resolved into what she'd actually said.

"Let's just call it even," I replied.

"No. I mistrusted you … one of the few good guys in the city."

From the direction of Grand Army Plaza, footsteps pounded up the street. I turned my head to find Captain Cole flanked by two NYPD officers. A block beyond them, more officers were working to keep the press in their cordoned-off zone. Half of the cameras were aimed at the inferno, the other half at me.

Cole arrived in front of us, his expression either one of concern or anger, I couldn't tell. Everything was going hazy. His gaze fell to the arrow in my leg.

"Ambulances are on the way," he said.

"How many did we lose?" I asked, not wanting to know, but needing to.

"You don't have to worry about that right now," he replied.

"How many?" I repeated.

"Thirty-six men."

Thirty-six. The number echoed numbly in my skull.

I had buried myself in the Central Park operation. I had poured in everything—my resources as an academic, as a wizard—to assess the monster threat, to determine the safest, most effective way to combat it. But I'd been kidding myself. With specters of revenge whispering around me, I'd missed things that should have been obvious. The goblins' tunnel networks under Paris were storied. Why couldn't their race have done the same under Central Park? And now, as a result of those oversights, more than a third of the Hundred were dead. Men with wives and children…

"I've already spoken to the mayor," Cole said. "He's meeting with advisors to determine the next step."

The first ambulances rounded the corner and slowed toward us. Beneath the strobing lights, rear doors opened. Attendants in blue coveralls emerged. Thelonious's growing presence made me waver as I pushed myself to my feet. I couldn't even feel the arrow in my calf anymore.

“Her first,” I slurred, nodding at Vega.

The attendants wrapped her in a foil blanket and, squinting from the heat, helped her into the closer ambulance. Her eyes lingered on mine until the doors closed. I bent to retrieve my sword and staff, slotting them back together. When two more attendants approached me, I turned away in a limping half circle, the creamy waves really storming in now.

I didn’t fight it.

“Croft,” Cole barked. “Where are you going?”

“To catch a cab,” I said faintly.

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Foul smoke laced the air outside my apartment the next morning. Hungover and sore, I limped up the street alongside a truck delivering morning editions of the *Gazette*. That the delivery was late told me printing had been delayed to carry the news of last night's operation. I didn't know how the mayor had spun the bungled job and didn't want to. Adjusting my sunglasses above my fake beard, I looked away so as not to catch any headlines.

I did the same on the bus ride to Midtown, averting my eyes from the spread-open papers. I didn't even want to glimpse the expressions of the commuters reading them. Smoke from Central Park drifted past the windows. North of Twenty-third Street, it became so thick that I started to see pedestrians in surgical masks.

I entered Midtown College through a back door and removed my disguise. I had nearly canceled my morning class, but it was almost finals week, and I'd already canceled last week's classes to work on the operation. The college was one bridge I couldn't afford to burn.

My right calf throbbed with magic as I climbed the empty stairwell. I'd awoken before dawn in a doorway in Times Square, a flat bourbon bottle between my legs and quarters everywhere. I did the post-Thelonious check, patting my pockets for wallet and keys. Both there. Clothing, cane, and necklace intact as well. I then craned my body around to read a flashing sign overhead. Thelonious had ended up at a peep show, which explained the quarters. His visit this time had been short and tame. Maybe he was tiring of using me as a vessel. For once, though, I hadn't minded the oblivion.

Upon returning home and treating the arrow wound, I had a sober hour to reflect on the horror of last night's operation. Of what I had allowed to happen. Thirty-six dead. Men who would still be living if I'd been thinking clearly instead of about what the mage had done to my mother, what he could still do to me.

I had decided then and there that I was no good to anyone until I hunted him down and destroyed him.

That would be my priority.

In that vein, if there were any potential positives to come from last night's operation, it would be my removal from the program. Budge's

first act to save face. He didn't need a wizard now, anyway. He could simply napalm the rest of Central Park. He wouldn't get his cookout, no—at least not the kind he wanted—but neither would he suffer the fallout from further casualties. And he'd have dump trucks full of charred creatures to show for his effort.

"Sorry I'm late," I said as I stepped into my classroom.

Two students stared back at me: Denise and Brie. I checked my watch as I unshouldered my satchel and dropped it onto my desk. I wasn't *that* late.

"Where is everyone?"

"We didn't think you'd come," Denise said.

I squinted at the young woman before realizing there must have been something in the paper about my injuries. "Oh, that. No, no, I'm fine." I flexed my right knee a couple of times to show her.

"Is it true?" Brie asked.

The words seemed to tremble past her lips. I set my leg back down and studied her again. Was I missing something? The two young women were among my more enthusiastic students—both added after the ghoul operation—but now their faces were taut and pale.

"Is what true?" I asked.

Denise took a folded newspaper from her bag and pushed it to the edge of her desk as though it were an explosive device. I broke my rule by looking at it and nearly choked at what I saw.

Above the side column that featured my headshot was a single-word headline:

TRAITOR

I lifted the paper from her desk and unfolded it. For a dizzying moment, I was in my mother's staggering, bleeding body with that word, that awful word, being hurled at me from all sides.

NEW YORK - Everson Croft, the wizard consultant to Mayor Lowder's ambitious eradication program, gave faulty information that led to the slaughter of three dozen NYPD officers, a credible source claimed.

The men lost their lives in last night's operation to clear the southern end of Central Park.

"Croft knew the Hundred would be overwhelmed by creatures," the source, who asked to remain anonymous, said. "Which was why he underestimated the threat. He wanted the operation to fail, and fail spectacularly."

According to Police Commissioner Warren, the operation did not fail, thanks to the decisive actions of Captain Lance Cole. "He made the right call, meeting the overwhelming force with attack helicopters and napalm," Warren said. "Indeed, Cole may be the only reason the Hundred wasn't reduced to zero."

As for Croft's motive, the anonymous source said the wizard is secretly working for the city's banking class.

"With Mayor Lowder close to securing the federal bailout, the city will no longer be in the thrall of the big firms," the source said. "The firms know this. They're fighting it. They need the mayor to lose his reelection bid, which means denying him any success. Croft was a plant to that end."

Though the large firms, including Chillington Capital, have contributed millions to Lowder's opponent, the source declined to speculate on whether Abby Azonka knew of the arrangement.

"But there's something Azonka should know," the source said. "She's accepting money from vampires, and I don't mean the figurative kind. Let's just say not all of the city's creatures hide underground."

When asked whether Croft was one such creature, the source said, "No, but he might as well be."

The mayor's office declined to comment on the story, declaring it under investigation.

In the meantime, the city is planning a dedication for the slain officers today at noon, and…

I returned the paper to Denise and stepped slowly backwards until I was leaning against my desk. The room revolved around me. *"…bad information … wanted the operation to fail … a plant…"* My two students looked on worriedly as I choked down a surge of liquor and bile.

Last night Cole had said the mayor was meeting with advisors to determine the next step. Was this what the fae had come up with? Was this their solution to the bungled operation? To throw me under the bus?

Impossible, I thought. *Caroline would never let that happen.*

But was it impossible? Given the insinuations against Budge's opponent, the anonymous source had clearly come from the mayor's office. And Caroline's allegiance was to the fae now, to securing the portal in lower Manhattan. In the eyes of her race, the fate of someone like me meant nothing.

Hence, Caroline's warnings, I realized.

But why make me a traitor? Why link me to the bankers?

Because the portal is located in vampire territory.

Securing Federal Hall, the building in which the lower portal was housed, was only half the battle for the fae. The other half was them being able to come and go as they needed. The vampires may have been making that difficult, demanding a hefty tribute or something. The solution? Poison my name to mitigate any political fallout from the operation and then put me in league with the vampire bankers,

thus poisoning them too.

Two birds, meet one stone.

I raised my gaze to the students. “No,” I answered. “It’s not true.”

Denise let out a relieved laugh. “We knew it.”

Brie drew a finger through the mascara-tinted tears forming beneath her eyes. Her voice hitched as she spoke. “It’s just, you’re our favorite teacher, and—and—and everyone was talking like you’d done these horrible things. And—and we just refused to believe it.”

“Thanks,” I said, digging into my pocket and handing her a clean handkerchief. “That’s really nice of you. Both of you. Class will be cancelled until we can get this sorted out.”

I spoke calmly, but my mind was scrambling like a spider in a glass jar. I needed to get out of here, needed to get to a phone. I would call Vega, even Budge—someone who could tell me what in the hell was going on.

“Is there anything we can do?” Denise asked.

“Maybe don’t mention I was here?” I suggested.

Denise and Brie nodded as though taking solemn vows. That would help, anyway. As they collected their bags, I slung my satchel over a shoulder and retrieved my cane. I would go out the way I came in, don the sunglasses and beard to disguise me from a public that wanted my head on a pike, and go straight to a payphone.

Someone cleared his throat.

I spun toward the doorway. At first I saw only the backs of my departing students, but when they stepped around a diminutive figure in a bowtie and three-piece suit, my heart plummeted into my stomach.

“Going somewhere?” my department chair asked.

“Professor Snodgrass,” I said, then thought, *please tell me you didn’t read this morning’s paper.*

His triumphant grin suggested otherwise. “What did I tell you?” He took a jaunty step into the room. “I said this wasn’t over, that I was going to be watching you. It appears I had good reason, Croft.”

“It’s Professor Croft,” I answered testily.

“Not anymore.” He stepped inside the room. “You’re suspended.”

“Based on an anonymous allegation?” I snorted. “We’ll see what the board has to say about that.”

“Oh, the board’s spoken.” He reached into his jacket pocket and handed me a crisp white envelope. I searched Snodgrass’s face for a lie as I stood my cane against my desk. I opened the envelope and unfolded the letter. It was a suspension order, signed by Chairman Cowper.

“Effective *immediately*,” Snodgrass said, stepping to my side.

My face smoldered at his undisguised glee. “I can read.”

“Oh, and there’s more.”

“What, you’re an admitted cross-dresser?”

Hands clasped behind his back, Snodgrass gave a forbearing smile. “Hold onto that humor, Mr. Croft. You’re going to need it where you’re going.” He turned his face toward the door and called, “You can come in now.”

Three bulky NYPD officers pushed into the room. I recognized them as members of the Hundred. One led with a pistol. The other two wielded police batons. Loathing creased their faces.

“It’s a lie,” I told them.

“Everson Croft,” the lead officer growled. “You’re under arrest for treason and accessory to mass murder.”

Snodgrass retreated past the officers. “For the record, the college stands firmly with the NYPD. Use whatever force you deem justifiable, men. Rest assured, there will be no one here to witness it.”

Without taking my gaze from the advancing officers, I unshouldered my satchel, reached for where I’d set my cane—and swiped air. When Snodgrass turned and stepped into the hallway I saw that he’d hidden my cane behind his back. *That son of a…* Grinning, he balanced my cane on an index finger and closed the door behind him. I retrained my focus on the advancing officers and tried to summon my wizard’s voice.

“Look guys,” I stammered, “you need to let me explain.”

“Explain it to Charlie Dumars,” the lead officer said, his voice low and steely. “Or how about Eddie Gleeson, Don Whitley, T Bone Jones. Explain it to the thirty-two others you murdered.”

“I underestimated the threat,” I admitted, backing away from them. “I screwed up. But not in the way it’s being spun.”

“Shut him up,” the lead officer ordered.

The two flanking officers raised their batons and rushed forward.

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Raw energy crackling against my prism, I aimed my palms toward the advancing officers, squinted my eyes—and at the last second, covered my head. Without my cane, I didn't have control. I could maim the officers, or worse. God knew, I didn't need more dead NYPD on my conscience. And it would make me look guilty, putting the remaining officers in the city on shoot-to-kill orders.

I would take my lumps, play possum, and then determine a non-lethal way out of this.

I squinted up as the officers descended on me.

Maybe easier said than done.

The first baton blow cracked my right forearm, the pain shooting all the way to my shoulder. The second baton caught me across the diaphragm. The air left my lungs in a nauseating grunt. I dropped to my knees and folded over, arms wrapping my head.

The batons rained down on my back in deep, thudding blows.

Stay conscious, Everson, I thought through gritted teeth.

"Stop!" a woman shouted.

The blows tapered, then ceased. I fell to my side, my body one big, throbbing slab of pain. I could hear the officers breathing heavily as limping footsteps entered the classroom.

"I want three minutes with him," the woman said, "then he's all yours again."

I looked up, half-expecting to see a recovered Penny, but I found Detective Vega instead. Hardly a *whew* moment. Vega glared down at me, her lips a trembling line.

When the officers didn't move, she barked, *"Alone."*

The sharpness of the command got them moving. They filed out into the hallway, shutting the door behind them.

"Oh, c'mon," I grunted through the pain. "You don't believe that horseshit in the paper."

"You don't speak unless I tell you to." She drew her pistol and aimed it at my head. "On your feet."

"Apparently you do," I muttered.

"I'm not going to ask you again," she said.

"Oh, was that a request?"

Using the seat of a nearby desk, I pushed myself to one knee and then up to my feet. Amoeba-like spots swam over my vision. When they receded, Vega had stepped closer. She was wearing one of her all-black suits, a metal brace bracketing her right knee. Her knuckles were white around her pistol grip. I'd seen her angry before, but this seemed different, worse.

"You're a fucking liar," she said.

"Do I have permission to speak now?"

"You told me you weren't working with the blood-suckers, and you're neck deep in them."

"Your proof?"

"And *I'm* the one who vouched for you, you piece of shit."

"Exactly," I said, anger breaking through my voice. "So how in the hell could I be a plant?"

"I swear to God, I could kill you right now."

"Really?" I staggered back from her thrusting pistol, my palms showing. I glanced past her to my classroom door, where the officers were peering in through the mesh window. I half considered waving the three inside to resume beating me—I liked my chances better with them—but with my next stumbling step backwards, I was beyond their view.

"I'd be doing this city a favor," Vega went on.

"You're a detective," I said. "Exercise some logic, for Christ's sake. If I'd wanted the Hundred decimated, why did I risk my neck to get them out of the park? Why would I—"

"Shut up!" she shouted. But her eyes were suddenly out of sync with her voice. They seemed to soften as they cut to my right.

"Huh?"

"Shut it, I said!" Louder, and with the same eye motion.

I peeked over my shoulder. The window. Vega had steered me into the corner and out of sight of the officers for a reason. When I looked back at her, she nodded once, eyes insistent. I reached back and thumbed the latch open. That she didn't shoot told me I'd read her intentions correctly.

"You don't get it!" she shouted, clearly for the officers to hear. "You're scum to me! You're nothing!"

"Thank you," I said, and slid the window up.

"I can buy you a minute," she whispered. "No more."

I threw a leg out and, ducking beneath the raised window, brought the other leg out until I was sitting on the sill. I looked down at the one-story drop into an alley that ran behind the college.

"Vega, I…"

"Don't make me regret this," she whispered, and gave me a shove.

I plummeted the ten feet, arms pinwheeling. The instant my feet

contacted ground, I folded my knees and crashed onto my side. Despite the pain, I was up quickly. I tilted my face to where Vega resumed yelling at the spot where I'd been standing, carrying on the charade.

She was risking a lot to give me a head start, God love her.

I took off at a shambling run down the alleyway. I needed to make every second count.

Paces from breaking out onto Forty-fifth Street I realized my disguise was still in my pocket. I stuttered to a stop, strapped the dark-brown beard around my head, and pushed on my sunglasses. I then peered around the corner. Several police cruisers were parked along the side of the college. More would be rushing in soon. I needed a better disguise.

I spotted an aging wino squatting in the alcove of a shuttered business, flies buzzing around his fishing hat. Despite the summer heat, he was wrapped in a dirty brown topcoat. Bingo. I just hoped he'd socked away enough brain cells to perform a simple transaction.

"Hey," I said, jogging towards him.

The rim of his stained fishing hat tilted up, and a whiskered face squinted from the shade.

"How much for the hat and coat?" I asked.

"How much ya got?" he asked back.

"How about a twenty?" I fished the bill from my wallet.

He chuckled and shook his head.

"Seriously?" I said, looking at the soiled articles. "That's being *very* generous."

"What? I'm supposed to jump up and shuck my duds at the first whiff of money? I've got more dignity than that. Besides," he said, his eyes taking on a dangerous intelligence, "I know that panting voice. You're on the run, my friend. Meaning I'm not just providing you goods, but a service."

"Service?"

"You don't want me to squeal to the boys in blue, do you? Give them an up-to-date description?" He winked as a yellow smile appeared inside his whiskers. "So let me ask you again. How much ya got?"

I swore as I leafed through my wallet. "One-forty," I muttered.

He snatched the sheaf of bills, stuffed them away, and then shed his coat with exaggerated care. I looked over my shoulder, an anxious pressure ballooning my bladder. My minute was almost up.

"C'mon, already," I said, shifting from one foot to the other.

The man stood and insisted on helping me into the coat—an act he also performed as if he had all week. Finally, he pried his hat from an oily pile of hair and pressed it down over my head.

He looked me up and down. “Out of this world!”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same,” I said, but referring to the coat’s god-awful stench. “Hey, could you see it in your heart to give me back a twenty? I don’t have anything for cab fare.”

“Read the fine print.” He clapped my shoulder three times. “All transactions final.”

My face burned at the man’s laughter, but I didn’t have time to argue. A block behind me, shouts were breaking from Midtown College, and I knew what that meant. Without turning, I assumed the staggering walk of the homeless. Plenty of those in Midtown, which was unfortunate for them, but very fortunate for me. The police would be looking for a professor.

“Good luck,” the man called after me, and laughed some more.

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Police cars crawled past, canvassing the streets around the college. I continued my shuffling walk, eyes alert behind my sunglasses for signs of danger—such as the pair of officers up ahead, sticking their heads into businesses and taking a close look at the foot traffic.

Can't appear alarmed, I thought, my pulse racing. *Have to keep walking.*

When the officers were almost to me, I staggered toward a man in business attire and petitioned him for change. The man grumbled, and a quarter landed in my palm. The police officers glanced at the exchange but kept walking. I needed to get the hell out of Midtown.

But where to go?

I squeezed the quarter as I considered my options. The apartment was out; NYPD would be all over the building. Thankfully, Tabitha would be okay on her own for a few days. She couldn't get into the fridge, but she'd be able to access the pantry and run the water taps. Worst case, there were pigeons. She wouldn't be happy about it, but she'd survive.

I shuffled through a short list of alternate destinations.

The East Village again? I shook my head. The abandoned buildings might hide me from mobsters but not from a determined police force that numbered in the tens of thousands. That went for any of the crumbling neighborhoods. I didn't just need a hiding place this time; I needed protection.

I considered the two who had already offered me safe houses: Caroline and Arnaud.

I hated both options, frankly. The fae townhouse in the Upper East Side was closer, about thirty blocks north, but there was the *Gazette* article. If the fae had been the source of the fabricated story, regardless of Caroline's role, I wouldn't find safe haven among them now.

That left Arnaud and his fortified Financial District.

I swore at the fact I was even considering him. That would be another awful move, though. Besides the fact that Arnaud would only protect me to the extent he could use me, running to the vampires would slap a "guilty" moniker beside my name and ring it in bright

red lights.

No, there had to be a third option.

More police cruisers appeared. Another foot patrol hurried along the sidewalk across the street from me. I continued my homeless shuffle, pausing to paw through a trashcan. Far down the valley of buildings, the smoky sky opened over the Hudson River, New Jersey on its far shore.

Something Chicory had told me years before suddenly came back.

If you need to flee the city for any reason, he'd said*, there's a spot on Gehr Place, just over the river. Little blue house on a short street. You can't miss it.* Chicory didn't elaborate other than to say the house was to be used in life or death situations only. This seemed to meet that requirement.

To get there, though, I'd need money.

I looked at the quarter I'd been handed. Well short of cab fare, but for a bus through the Lincoln Tunnel I'd only need a dollar fifty more. I knew where a stop was, too. Tacking north and west, I petitioned more pedestrians. Two blocks later, I had enough—and just as a Jersey-bound bus was pulling up to the stop.

Thank God.

I hurried toward the bus and boarded, two foot patrols converging on the sidewalk behind me.

I took a seat near the bus's rear door and looked out the grimy window. The police officers stopped to talk. A couple of them pointed back toward the east. With a grunt, the bus pulled from the stop in the opposite direction. I snuck a look around. The handful of passengers jouncing in their seats weren't interested in me. I relaxed back into the fumes of my coat.

Almost home free, I thought. *Thanks to Vega.*

She must have seen I was being set up and rushed to the college to beat the police there, probably after trying me at my apartment. When she found me in their custody, she had improvised, pretending to want some one-on-one time to tear into me. And, man, had she sold it.

If I ever got out of this, I owed that woman. Big time.

Right now, though, I had to consider my next move. After Chicory had told me about the house, I'd located Gehr Place on a map. I pulled up the mental equivalent. *Should be easy enough to reach,* I thought, working out the route for when I got off the bus. *Then I'll find the blue house and see what's what.* I couldn't imagine the Order would be upset. I had received permission from Chicory to participate in the eradication program, after all. The lie about working with the vampires could hardly be blamed on me. Then again, we were talking about the Order.

"Oh, fer chrissake," the bus driver complained above the sharp hiss

of air brakes.

Seizing the pole beside me, I rose and peered out the front window. We had just crossed Seventh Avenue, and for the next block and a half, red brake lights stared back at us through the smoke. I peered beyond the backup and felt my heart climb into my throat. The police had set up a checkpoint.

I blew out a hard sigh. *Of course they did.*

Up ahead, officers were interrogating drivers and opening trunks and van doors. I pictured a large cordon around Midtown, the college at the epicenter. Probably had the subway stations manned as well.

But that wasn't the worst part.

As the bus inched forward, I could make out the uniforms of government security guards. The frigging werewolves were in on the hunt. Which meant that no matter how good my disguise or how foul smelling my coat, I wouldn't escape their detection. I had to get off. Now.

I pulled the yellow bell cord. A sharp ding sounded. When the driver didn't stop, I yanked the cord twice more.

"Heard you the first time, pal," he growled. "The stop isn't for another block."

"Here's fine," I insisted.

"Can't do it."

Another block would put me too close to the checkpoint. And depending on which way the wind was blowing… Crap. Outside my window, the triangular flaps from a theater awning were batting westward. If I disembarked any nearer, the wolves would definitely pick up my scent.

I slapped at the back door. "C'mon, man. I've gotta go."

"Cross your legs and clench."

Several passengers chuckled at the driver's quip, but it gave me an idea.

"Fine," I said, pretending to unbuckle my pants as I squatted. "It's your mess."

The ruse worked. The driver's eyes started in the rearview mirror, and he stomped the brakes. The back door flopped open. I wasted no time jumping from the bus, the driver's colorful threats trailing after me.

I waited until I was halfway down the block before peeking over a shoulder. At the checkpoint, one of the wolves had straightened from a car he'd been inspecting. His head was tilted back in a sniffing posture. Through the smoke and exhaust, a slip of my scent had reached him.

Swearing, I hastened my pace.

At the far end of the block, I spotted the four officers I'd seen from

the bus. They were turning back in my direction, one of them speaking into his shoulder mike. Wonderful. The werewolf must have radioed to tell them I was near. I slowed as more officers appeared. They were stopping pedestrians now, herding everyone toward the checkpoint with shouts and pistol motions.

Several officers remained behind to watch buildings—no doubt until a wolf arrived to clear them. I took a hard right into a Korean grocery store. There would be a rear exit, maybe an alleyway, a fence I could jump. But I had barely made it past a stand of colorful snack bags when a squat woman charged from behind the register and blocked my way.

"You leave!" she shouted up at me. "No steal food!"

My disguise was a little *too* good, apparently. "No, no, I'm not here to take anything. I just wanted to see if you have a back door." My hope was to slip out before the officers could cover the rear of the building. I pointed past the woman and spoke slowly. "Back door?"

"No steal food!" she repeated, jabbing me in the stomach with a pair of fingers.

"Hey! Ow!"

All right, this wasn't working. Not wanting to draw any more attention, I retreated back onto the sidewalk. To one side of me, the police were continuing to drive the crowd forward. On the other, two wolves were approaching from the checkpoint, closing in on my scent. No way I'd be able to challenge them without my staff and sword.

Trapped mid block, I dug an arm into a trashcan, pretending to look for food. My thoughts scrambled madly. The second a wolf got close enough to ID me, I'd be grabbed. And given the severity of the accusations, the best I could hope for was life without parole.

Assuming I wasn't torn apart.

Need to calm down, I thought above my pounding heart. *Need to think.*

Shoes clanged over metal as the first wave of distressed pedestrians moved past, the herding officers at their rear.

I honed in on the clanging sound.

There's my escape.

Using the pedestrians as cover, I stayed low and wended my way toward the noise. Soon, a rectangular opening in the sidewalk appeared, covered by sections of metal grating. The final section rattled under the growing footfalls.

I hustled ahead of the barking calls of the officers, shouldered several pedestrians aside, and pulled the grate free. A few complaints went up around me, but I was quickly inside and hanging from a shelf beneath the lip of the opening. I pulled the grating back into place and looked down between my dangling feet. It was a decent drop,

about twenty feet to the tracks below, but it could have been worse. Some of the holes went down five stories.

Still, going underground was going underground—something I hated worse than tax time. A pressure was already building against my chest, thinning my breaths. I closed my eyes.

Let's just hope a train isn't coming, I thought, and let go.

I swung my arms around until my palms were aimed at the up-rushing ground and shouted, *"Vigore!"*

Energy ripped through me and hit the ground with enough force to stall my descent. I landed in a crouch as though I'd only dropped five feet, pocketed my beard and sunglasses, and peered up at the shadows passing over the grate. One of the shadows stopped. A light glared and swept across my face.

"Hey!" an officer shouted. "Stay right there!"

Great, some goody two shoes must've alerted them to my plunge.

I hurried down the tracks until I was out of view of the grate. Jumping the thrumming third rail, I climbed onto a service walkway that paralleled the tracks. The tunnel stretched north and south into blackness.

I dug through the bum's coat pockets, hoping to find a lighter, but all I came up with was a sizeable collection of cigarette butts and a Honey Bun wrapper. That left my coin pendant. I loosened the coat and unbuttoned my shirt until the pendant dangled into view.

"Illuminare," I said.

Energy crackled around the coin. Moments later, a soft blue light suffused it, illuminating the space for several feet ahead of me.

I took a moment to get my bearings. That the rail was active told me I was in the Seventh Avenue line. Unfortunately it didn't feature any branches to Jersey. None of the subway lines did. Meaning I could either head north, in the direction of the Bronx, or south, toward lower Manhattan. I grimaced at the thought of entering Arnaud's district before understanding I wouldn't get that far, even if I wanted to. My pursuers knew I was down here. At this moment, officers would be descending into the stations on both sides of me, hemming me in.

As if to affirm the claustrophobic thought, to the north flashlights beams swam against a distant bend in the tunnel.

Adrenaline screaming through my body, I dimmed the light in the coin pendant and hurried south along the walkway. There were no light beams coming from the tunnel ahead of me—yet. But if wolves had joined the posse at my back, they would be on me in short time.

Think, Croft. Think goddammit.

The defunct Broadway line was only a block or so to the east, the stations all barricaded. If only I could find some way to—

There!

A metal door appeared in the wall to my left. I pulled the handle, surprised when a crust of rust broke off and the door swung open. A service tunnel plunged into darkness. I scooted inside and closed the door as a powerful flashlight beam shot past. The south-bound team had arrived.

I broke into a run, faded graffiti art on the tunnel's brickwork whizzing past. I'd gone about a hundred feet when a cinderblock wall reared up in front of me.

Wha—?

I got my arms up a split second before impact. The violent rebound threw me onto my back, head cracking against the floor. Stars wheeled around my staring gaze.

I struggled into a kneeling position, then stood, catching myself against the wall. The cinderblocks glowed gray-blue in the light of my coin. When the Transit Authority had closed the Broadway line, they'd apparently sealed off all of the access tunnels. That could be remedied. Aiming my palms at the wall, I called power to my prism—or tried to. The collision had shrouded it in fog. I began a rapid centering chant to restore my ability to cast.

I didn't get very far. A deep growl rumbled behind me.

I spun, the mantra breaking off. A second growl sounded, this one from a different body. Two sets of eyes shone into view down the tunnel, their orange irises fiery with anger.

Beyond them, a small army of footsteps echoed toward the service tunnel entrance. I pressed my back to the wall like a cornered cat and squinted as a flashlight beam hit me in the eyes.

"We've got him!" an officer shouted.

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With one hand blocking the flashlight beam, I could make out the advancing werewolves. They were still in human form, but the chase had aroused their lupine natures. Beneath wrinkling nostrils, lips peeled from fanged teeth. Muscles bulged underneath their uniforms.

Just need some time, I thought.

Summoning what meager power I could to my wizard's voice, I shouted, "Stop!"

The wolves hesitated, startled more than enthralled, it seemed. Without taking my eyes off them, I removed my necklace, palming the large coin pendant, which continued to glow a pale blue, and held it out in front of me.

"This is silver," I lied, the iron cold in my grip. "If I cast through it, it will burn you alive."

When the wolves' nostrils flared, I drew the coin back inside the bouquet of my coat to cloak its scent. The wolves would pick out the iron eventually, but not before my prism was restored.

I hoped.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," I said. "I just want to negotiate the terms of my surrender." The pressure of being underground was stifling my voice, stealing its power. The words themselves would have to convince them.

"We don't negotiate with cop-killing pieces of shit," someone called back.

"Yeah, how about we just stick a few bullets between your eyes?" someone else put in.

I squinted toward the multiplying beams of light. Though I couldn't see the police officers holding the flashlights, it wasn't hard to imagine their hostile faces—or the guns they were aiming. If the wolves and NYPD had something in common, it was their belief that I had willfully murdered members of their brotherhood. Like blood spreading through water, a scarlet aura of vengeance united them. I would have to tread really damned carefully.

"I just have one request for my surrender," I said.

"Lower your weapon!" an officer ordered.

"That Detective Hoffman make the arrest," I persisted.

There was nothing special about Detective Hoffman. He just happened to be one of the few officers I knew by name, other than Vega. And I didn't want to get Vega any more involved than she already was. Requesting Hoffman was a stalling tactic, something to buy me a precious minute or two.

"We're not gonna warn you again, Croft! Lower your fucking weapon and get on the ground!"

I could practically feel the tension on their triggers.

I swallowed. "Just contact him, let me know he's on the way, and I'll do everything you say, I promise. No one gets hurt."

The wolves growled in the silence that followed. Like the officers, they had heard rumors of my powers, the feats I was capable of. Publicity had its perks. It was this more than anything, I suspected, that held them at bay. If they knew how defenseless I was, my face would've been eating concrete by now. I blinked sweat from my lashes as I chanted softly and awaited the verdict.

Hopefully it wouldn't come in the form of a firing squad.

The officers must have been consulting in whispers because one of them finally said, "We're calling him now."

My legs buckled in relief, but I steeled myself. I still had work to do. I closed my eyes to the wolves, the flashlight beams—pushed them to the back of my thoughts—and returned to my training with Lazlo.

This may be the most important lesson I ever teach you, my first teacher had said. *If you lose your prism, you must retain your focus. A wizard who cannot cast is a dead wizard.*

I remembered the way Lazlo's cloudy, wolf-torn eye had stared into mine.

In the tunnels beneath New York, I whispered and re-whispered the centering mantra.

Deep in my mind, the prism vibrated. Power eddied through my body. I repeated the chant until the prism's contours appeared through the fog, glowing as they returning to form.

"Hoffman's on the way," an officer barked. "Now surrender your weapon and get facedown on the floor, like you promised." The flashlights advanced above a careful procession of footsteps.

I watched the wolves stalk closer too, the lead one sniffing the air.

"He's not packing silver," he growled, his advance becoming more confident.

The wolves were fifteen feet from me now, close enough that I could see follicles of hair growing from their foreheads and jowls. They couldn't hold their wolves inside any longer. The hunger for pack justice was too powerful.

A little closer… I thought.

"I'm warning you, Croft," an officer said.

I extended the coin out in front of me, its edges crackling with blue light.

"On my order," I caught the same officer mutter.

It had to be now.

"Illuminare!" I bellowed.

The energy that stormed through my restored prism emerged from the coin as a dazzling explosion of light. For an instant, the tunnel turned bright white. The wolves recoiled with snarling cries. I could see the officers now—eight of them—arms thrown to their faces.

A shot went off, ricocheting from the wall to my left.

"Vigore!" I cried.

Power branched from my other palm and slammed into the wolves. They cannoned into the officers behind them, flipping them like bowling pins. When they landed, several officers pawed around for their weapons, stunned and blinded. I was safe from them for the moment. The wolves, with their uncanny senses of hearing and smell, were another story. They staggered onto their hands and feet, more lupine now than human.

Replacing the coin around my neck, I turned and pressed both hands to the wall.

"Forza dura!" I shouted.

In an explosion of mortar, the wall toppled away. I scrambled over the collapse and into the sewer-like stench of the Broadway line. Following the successful operation two weeks before, armed teams had swept the lines and destroyed the handful of remaining ghouls. Restoration work had already begun. I emerged through the dust to find a string of lights running along the tunnel above step ladders and large bundles of electrical wire. No workers, fortunately.

I dropped onto the tracks. A few blocks to the north, lights glowed where the Broadway line shared the Forty-Second Street station with the Seventh Avenue line. The station was inside the cordon and could still be manned by police. I sidestepped away from it and broke into a run.

I'd have to take my chances south.

My plan was to go about fifteen, twenty blocks, then climb one of the emergency staircases located halfway between stations. I'd blow open the hatch beneath the sidewalk and try to blend into the street scene, somewhere in the Twenties. From there, I'd work my way south and west toward the piers with Jersey-bound ferries. The last step—catching a boat—would be the most difficult, but I'd worry about that when I got there. Which was feeling far from certain.

It was my phobia, dammit. After only a hundred yards, my lungs were already heaving for air. My chest wasn't allowing enough oxygen in or poisonous CO_2 out.

Growls sounded from the service tunnel behind me.

And then there was the matter of the werewolves.

I'd read about the effects of bright lights on their brain synapses and had been counting on a longer time to recover. Now I listened in horror to the sounds of cinderblocks grating and toppling. So much for that theory. The wolves had just joined me in the line.

Ahead, a door to an emergency staircase appeared, but I was still inside the cordon. If any of the downed officers had recovered enough to radio out, the street would be covered. I shed my coat—the lion's share of my disguise—and slung it in front of the door. With any luck, the wolves would stop and sniff it and then expend time deciding whether or not I'd ascended.

I ran on. With each gasping breath, a cramp gored my side; spots danced around my vision. From around a bend, the yellow lights of another station glowed into view. *Crap.* I was coming up on Thirty-fourth Street, a station the Broadway line shared with an intersecting line.

But as I started to slow, I spotted a parked vehicle ahead.

What in the…?

The vehicle pointing away from me looked like a cross between a large dune buggy and a truck. A flatbed hitched to its back was loaded with equipment. I took quick stock of the large tires balancing the vehicle on the tracks, two sets of smaller metal wheels in place to keep it from derailing. It was an MTA maintenance vehicle, no doubt parked outside the station for easy access. Someone had spray-painted BERTHA on the side of the truck in big balloon letters.

A set of keys dangled from Bertha's ignition.

Oh, hell yes.

Heart slamming, I climbed through the crash bars and slid behind the steering wheel. Behind me I could hear clawed feet pounding the tracks. The smelly coat hadn't fooled the wolves. I seized the key in the ignition, said a quick prayer, and gave a twist.

No response.

"Oh, Bertha, please don't do this to me."

I could hear the wolves' harsh panting now, echoing down the tunnel.

I looked around the cab for something I might have missed. The automatic gearshift beside my right leg was slotted in Drive. I pushed it to Park and twisted the key again. Bertha's engine chug-a-lugged for several agonizing seconds before turning over with a throaty roar.

"Yes!"

I yanked the gearshift into Drive and pressed the gas. The metal wheels whined against the rails, and Bertha rumbled forward. I waited for the speedometer to edge past twenty before allowing myself a

glimpse into the truck's side mirror. For a blessed instant, the tunnel curving away behind me was empty.

And then it wasn't.

The two wolves, in full wolf form, were speeding toward me like they were on a greyhound track, eyes burning with the hunt. In comparison, I felt like I was moving through thick mud.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," I pled, putting more weight on the gas pedal, which was already to the floor.

The needle trembled to thirty, the vehicle rumbling as if it were going uphill. It was the load. Bertha was pulling several hundred pounds of equipment. I turned around, craning my neck to see the hitch to the trailer. I might have tried to crack it with a focused force blast, but without my cane, I'd be more likely to derail both truck and trailer.

I straightened and looked into the side mirror again.

The wolves were closer, tongues lolling as their huge paws slammed the crossties.

Bertha continued its sluggish acceleration into the yellow lights of the Thirty-fourth Street station. The columned landing was empty. From one story up, where the Sixth Avenue line ran, I could hear the dull echoes of a PA system and the din of commuters.

Shouts rang out: "There he is!" "Stop right there, Croft!"

NYPD officers were pounding down a stairwell and leaping busted turnstiles. I ducked low as I passed them. Shots popped off, flashing from the hood of the truck. I was almost clear of the station when a hard explosion rocked me. Bertha wobbled and canted left. A metallic keening sounded. In the side mirror I caught sparks spitting from her lower body.

Damn, they blew a tire.

The speedometer, which had been creeping up to forty miles per hour thudded back to the low thirties. Behind me, the wolves began to gain. Up ahead, NYPD officers would no doubt be scrambling to head me off. There was no going up an emergency staircase now, no making my way to the piers jutting into the Hudson. The New Jersey plan was scrapped.

That leaves the vampires, I thought grimly.

Fleeing to them would make me look guiltier than sin, yeah, but when the alternative was death…

Problem was, I was three miles from the Wall Street station. Not only that, I didn't know what I would find when I got there. Given the vampires' vast security apparatus, I had to assume they'd barricaded the station to prevent infiltration from below. But I had a more immediate problem.

In the upcoming station, an assortment of abandoned maintenance

vehicles were clogging the tracks. I was on a collision course.

I stood and aimed a hand at them. *"Vigore!"*

Hot energy erupted from my palm. The vehicles capsized in a wave, derailed, but now littering the track. Seizing Bertha's steering wheel in both hands, I ducked low as her large front fender plowed into the pile-up. Metal banged and whined. I braced for derailment, but Bertha held on like a champ, her mass heaving us through to the other side of the mess. The blown wheel in back clunked as I depressed the accelerator and urged us back up to speed.

In the rearview mirror, the wolves had arrived at the downed vehicles and begun leaping them. Something on one of the upturned trucks caught my eye: a cylindrical gas tank.

There she blows, I thought.

Bertha decelerated as I climbed onto the crash bars. Over the top of the equipment that rocked and jostled on the flatbed, I lined up my right palm with the tank and yelled, *"Forza dura!"*

The force of the invocation threw me back into the cab. Reclaiming the steering wheel, I peered into the side mirror. The vehicles, having been blown skyward, were now crashing down in a deafening wave. From inside the cacophony, a wolf yelped.

Should slow them, but I missed the damn tank.

The thought had barely formed when a white flash appeared amid the wreckage followed by a deafening detonation. An orange fireball swallowed the thrown vehicles and stormed down the tunnel. I crouched as it roared past, flames searing my arms and hunched-over back. I held my breath to the strangling heat while slapping out a small fire atop my hat.

After a moment, the flames receded along with the piteous cries of the wolves. With a choked gasp, I inhaled the stench of burning diesel and focused on the tracks ahead. They switched here and there, throwing us from local to express tracks and back. I had no control over the switches, just the steering to ensure Bertha's rubber tires remained aligned with the rails.

It was a matter now of staying the course.

The next station was empty as well as the one after that. I had no way of knowing what was happening above ground, but my guess was that the NYPD, having sent the bulk of its force to Midtown, was now struggling to get officers into the Broadway line south of me, where many of the entrances remained sealed. If that held, and with the wolves no longer in pursuit, my chances of reaching Arnaud's district were starting to look decent.

I checked the speedometer and then my watch. At our current speed, we'd be at the Wall Street station in under five.

As the seconds ticked by, my body felt like an exposed nerve. I

marked off each station until I was coming up on Canal Street. Two weeks before, I had turned it into a ghoul crematorium. The station had yet to be cleaned. Bertha bumped over heaps of charred bones and through drifts of ash, the particles billowing up into the headlight beams.

I coughed as we thudded onward.

Only two stations from Wall Street. As Bertha rumbled through the Fulton Street stop, I rose from my seat to get a better look at the tunnel ahead. It ran around a bend, straightened, and then…

"Oh, shit."

I slammed the brakes hard. Too hard. The load in the flatbed trailer pushed against Bertha's rear, displacing the tires and metal wheels from the rails. I fought with the steering, but there was no correcting it. The truck and trailer jackknifed. I used the crash bars to brace myself as we capsized.

Bertha crashed and came to a sudden rest on her side. I'd managed to stay inside the cab, shocked but not hurt. I craned my neck to peer down the tracks. One of Bertha's headlights illuminated what I'd seen a moment before: an imposing steel wall and a line of government security guards standing in front of it. Their eyes glowed above their aimed pistols.

Distant commands sounded behind me—NYPD officers entering from the Fulton Street Station. Crackling power rushed to my prism, but I held back. The second I cast, I'd be shot dead.

"Yeah, yeah," I said tiredly, showing my hands. "I surrender."

"Music to my ears," a familiar voice said from the wolves. It was Flint, one of the wolves who had decked me in the West Village. On the outer edge of Bertha's light, his lupine teeth flashed. If his brother was among the dozen-odd wolves stalking toward me I couldn't see him.

"Where's Tweedledum?" I asked.

"I'd be worrying about yourself right now," Flint said with a snort. "I don't get you, Croft. You had official protection. Why'd your dumb ass throw it away? What'd the vamps promise you?"

"Nothing," I growled. "It's a goddamned lie."

"But at the first sign of heat, look where you ran." He glanced around. We must have been at Liberty Street. Aboveground—and below ground too, evidently—stood the forbidding Wall.

"Like I had a choice," I said. "The mayor's office planted that story about me. But you probably already know that."

"All I know are my orders."

"To bring me in?"

His delayed response told me everything. "Yeah, to bring you in."

I was being thrown to the wolves. Literally. Flint stepped forward,

reached down, and seized my arm. His grip was crushing. I hooked an elbow around one of the crash bars and grabbed my wrist with the other hand.

"Let go," he ordered.

"No."

He would pry me away eventually, but my powers needed time to recharge. Then I'd figure out how in the hell to use them. I braced for a shoulder-dislocating jerk, but Flint's grip relaxed. He raised his face and sniffed. I noticed some of the other wolves doing the same.

Flint was opening his mouth when automatic gunfire broke from the tunnel behind me. Wolves shouted and went down, smoke blowing from their wounds. Silver rounds.

A spray of blood hit me across the face. Flint released me, seizing his throat as he fell.

Within seconds, it was over. Pounding boots replaced gunfire. Men in body armor appeared, wrestled me from the toppled maintenance vehicle, and began running me toward the steel barrier. They weren't NYPD, which the wolves had realized too late. I recognized them as members of the vampires' private security force, the ones who guarded the Wall.

Behind me, single shots cracked as the mercenaries finished off the survivors.

Hydraulics sounded, and the steel barrier shuddered and rose. The guards hustled me into a corridor, the tracks replaced by cement flooring. After a couple of turns, we stopped in front of an elevator door. I stared at my dazed and blood-spattered reflection in the metal, dimly aware I'd lost my fishing hat.

The doors slid open, and my mirror image was replaced by a familiar figure. Immaculate, pale-faced, and featuring short, straight bangs, the blood slave flashed a wicked grin.

"Welcome to the Financial District, Mr. Croft," Zarko said. "Mr. Thorne has been expecting you."

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Still stunned from the chase, I rode the elevator with Arnaud's head blood slave in a buzzing silence. It was only when the doors opened on the top floor, and Arnaud's musky scent whisked in on the icy, climate-controlled air, that I realized we were in the vampire's building.

Zarko led me down the hallway toward Arnaud's office. Well before we arrived at the forbidding double doors, however, the blood slave stopped and turned toward another office. Producing a key, he unlocked and pushed open the door to an executive-level suite.

"There's a washroom in back, where you'll find a change of clothes," he said.

"What do I need to change for?"

I followed his gaze down my front. My sweat-sodden shirt was half unbuttoned, the sleeves and stomach stained with soot from the tunnels. Grease smeared the thighs of my pants.

"A high-level meeting," Zarko answered.

"With Arnaud?"

He leaned forward just enough to give a single sniff. "You should avail yourself of the shower as well," he said before stepping back, bowing, and closing the door behind him.

Vampires and their decorum.

But Zarko was right; I smelled like a bag of garbage left out in the sun.

Inside the bathroom, I found a dark suit hanging from the door beside a huge walk-in shower. I stripped off everything except my amulet and turned the controls to hot. Steaming water washed over me. I soaped and rinsed while I chanted Words of healing, blood and the filth of the tunnels sliding into the drain.

The shower was restorative, but I kept a keen vigil on the locked bathroom door. I had escaped the NYPD and wolves, yeah, but I wasn't exactly safe. I was in the stronghold of a killer—and naked in more ways than one. I bore no ring, no silver, nothing to keep the vampires off me. If Arnaud decided he wanted me dead, I was dead. Simple as that.

That I was here at his invitation offered little comfort. He would

protect me only as long as he could use me. I didn't know what he had in mind, but I had a feeling I was about to find out.

I cut the water and grabbed the towel hanging on the shower's back wall.

I also have a feeling I'm not going to like it.

"MR. CROFT," Arnaud said with exaggerated pleasantness.

He stood from the head of a long, coffin-shaped conference table. He wasn't alone. Eight other faces turned toward me. I recognized them from the news and covers of business magazines. They were the heads of New York's giant financial institutions. Unlike Arnaud, they wore dour suits, ties cinched to their throats. Like Arnaud, they were all vampires.

I stiffened as their hungry eyes fixed on me.

Arnaud opened a hand toward the empty chair at the other end of the table, directly opposite him. "Please," he said, "come in and join us." He nodded at Zarko to close the door.

I willed myself forward, hoping my tailored vicuña suit radiated the control and confidence I presently lacked. The vampires' predatory gazes followed me as I fumbled to pull the chair out and sit. I scooted forward with just as much clumsiness, then cleared my throat.

"Thank you," I said in a hard voice, which came out false-sounding.

"Several of you remember the wizard Asmus Croft, with whom we joined forces in Europe some centuries ago," Arnaud said, adjusting his earpiece as he sat again. "Everson Croft is his grandson. I've had the pleasure of his—how shall we say—*collaboration* in recent months. And here he is again."

To my right, a graying vampire with a lean undertaker's face made a noise of interest. He looked like a creature who lured children into alleyways with promises of candy, then stared, smiling, into their dimming eyes as he strangled the life from them. His cheeks began to dimple.

I quickly averted my gaze.

"Did I not anticipate this day, Mr. Croft?" Arnaud asked over his steepled fingers. Before I could answer, he directed himself to the others. "You see, when the poor boy and I last spoke, I told him that should we ever meet again, it would be because *he* had come to *me*." His eyes cut back to mine. "Mr. Croft was dubious. Fortunately for him, we were monitoring the encrypted police frequencies to know he had arrived at our doorstep."

The vampires sniggered in a way that said they knew the stupidity

of mortals all too well.

"I also anticipated the developments taking place in the city, but we'll get to that in a moment. First, I want to make one thing clear. As long as Mr. Croft is here, he is under my protection."

He spoke the words as though staking a claim. I understood then that the suit I wore was more than a clean change of clothing. In vampire society, it was a mark of ownership.

I shifted, the silky fabric suddenly stifling.

Arnaud stared around the table. Each vampire nodded his understanding of the claim, some more reluctantly than others, it seemed—especially the undertaker vampire beside me. Harsh energies moved throughout the room. A reinforcement of hierarchy?

When at last the energy settled, Arnaud's gaze returned to me. I read the glint in his stare: *Do not test me, Mr. Croft, for I am the only thing keeping them from your wizard's blood.*

I nodded, hardly aware I was doing it.

"Now to the business at hand," he said, breaking his eyes from mine. "The day has come, gentlemen. With one hand, City Hall is prying away the financial ties that have kept the city in our debt, and with the other, it seeks to drive the proverbial stake through our chests."

"The blasted werewolves are behind it," the youngest-looking vampire seethed.

"Now, now, Damien," Arnaud said. "Let's not fall victim to reductionist thinking. The werewolves have a role, yes, but there are *many* forces at work. The election, the upcoming bailout, the war against supernaturals—indeed, we're facing a perfect storm. One that will wipe us out if we do not keep our heads."

"You don't think Penny has awakened?" Damien persisted.

When Arnaud replied, vehemence scored his voice. "Penelope Lowder is not our concern."

I considered the vampire's question. Had Penny recovered? Had *she* been the one to link me to the vampires? The idea had flickered through my mind back in my classroom. There was certainly motive, namely that I had almost killed her. And then there was the age-old enmity between werewolves and vampires, as well as a more recent enmity between Arnaud and Penny. He had rejected her as his mate, and hell hath no fury…

But something didn't jibe.

Maybe it was the thought of Penny recovering from a prolonged coma and going directly on the offensive. A campaign of this scale would take time to plan and prepare and with no assurance of success.

Unless she's been awake this whole time, I thought.

I looked around the table. Could the eradication program have

been a pretext to a larger war between werewolves and vampires?

"And no, Penelope has not awakened," Arnaud said to Damien, killing my idea. "Do you think I am so foolish as to not be monitoring the situation? Regardless, the wolves see opportunity in our predicament. As do the fae. We are beset on all sides."

Though he'd brought the fae up, Arnaud didn't seem to suspect them of outing the vampires.

"Something to share, Mr. Croft?" he asked.

I couldn't think about the fae without thinking about Caroline. The idea that she may have played a role in my betrayal savaged my heart. Still, a competing instinct to protect her persisted. Sensing the emotions clashing inside me, Arnaud arched a slender eyebrow.

"No," I said quietly.

"Very well."

Arnaud dropped his gaze. I didn't realize a control pad was inset in the table above his lap until he tapped something. The paneled wall behind him rotated to become a large flat screen. The screen showed a satellite image of skyscraper-packed lower Manhattan, its northern boundary demarcated by the Wall. I noticed that the streets beyond the Wall had been cleared for several blocks, and…

I squinted forward. Was that a line of tanks?

"We are under siege," Arnaud confirmed. "Tanks rumble down from the north. Attack helicopters circle the skies. Gunboats have yet to appear, but they're coming. Fortunately, we keep an impressive military stock of our own. Defensively, we have land, air, and sea covered."

Along the top of the zoomed-in Wall, members of the vampires' security force manned what appeared to be anti-tank missiles. On the roofs of skyscrapers, anti-aircraft guns swiveled, tracking the helicopters' movements. The waterfront was manned as well, it appeared.

"Feeling safer, Mr. Croft?" Arnaud asked.

"For right now, yeah," I admitted. "But we're cut off. Nothing comes in or goes out."

"If you're worried about sustenance, you needn't. My fellow executives and I have our associates." Arnaud was referring to the blood slaves, from whom they could feed indefinitely. "As for you, we have independent sources of energy and clean water, as well as a large store of nonperishable goods. While you're inside our district, you'll want for nothing."

But what do you *want?* I wondered.

Instead, I asked, "What about the supernaturals? The wolves and the fae?"

"We'll worry about them when the time comes," he said. "Though I

do wish you would have brought your fellows. To take nothing away from you, Mr. Croft, but a dozen wizards are better than one."

Especially when that one wizard is essentially unarmed, I thought. Absent my staff, sword, and spell items, what power I wielded was wild and would deplete quickly. But I stuffed such worries away, not wanting Arnaud to pick up on them and decide I wasn't worth protecting.

"What's the end game?" I asked.

Before Arnaud could answer, the door to the conference room opened. I turned to find Zarko holding a phone.

"It's Mayor Lowder, sir," he said to Arnaud. "He would like to speak with you."

Arnaud nodded as though he'd been expecting the call. Zarko set the phone on the table in front of him and activated the handless feature. Arnaud rested an elbow over the back of his chair and laced his fingers.

"I'm disappointed in you, Mayor," he said. "I took you at your word."

I realized he was talking about the deal he had struck with Budge in which the vampire had protected the mayor's stepdaughter in exchange for amnesty. A hedge, he'd called it.

"*You're* disappointed?" Budge shot back. "How do you think I felt when I learned the star of my program was in your pay, trying to sabotage everything?"

"Bunch of B.S.," I muttered, anger toward the fae coiling my insides.

Arnaud showed a hand. "If you're referring to young Mr. Croft, he was not working at my behest, I assure you. He was entirely in your service. His intentions were quite golden, actually."

"Was that him I just heard in the background?" Budge asked.

"I won't deny his presence among us, but where else was he to have gone? It's not as though you left him a choice, sending the wolves after him. Do you think they would have listened patiently, chins on their paws, while he pled his innocence? Even you're not that obtuse, Mayor."

"Well, we've got a problem."

"It would appear so," Arnaud replied, picking at a talon as though his fortress wasn't under siege.

"I've got thirty-six men in the morgue, and a city convinced that, not only did Everson put them there, but that he's working for you. Oh yeah, and that you're all vampires."

"And why should that concern me?" Arnaud asked.

"Have you looked out your window lately?" Budge said, incredulous.

“I have, Mayor. But you and I both know that the charges are mostly falsehoods.”

The phone’s speaker hummed for several seconds, and I imagined the mayor consulting with someone off to the side. Caroline? At last, he cleared his throat and said, “We’ll pull back if you give us Everson. While we deal with him, I’ll, ah, work on putting out the vampire rumors.”

Give us Everson, Budge was saying, *and war will be averted.*

I pinched the corners of my eyes with a finger and thumb, trying to piece together what was happening on the mayor’s end. If Caroline was there advising him, was she trying to help me? Or would I be grabbed and thrown into a trial for public consumption? A trial seemed the logical next step in the fae’s campaign. They had already aroused the city’s sympathies and fears; now they could stoke a communal lust for justice—all to Budge’s and the fae’s benefit. The fae would get their preferred candidate and, using the vampire rumor as leverage against Arnaud, access to the lower portal. That may have been their plan all along.

One in which I’d served as unwitting pawn.

When I lowered my hand, Arnaud’s fellow executives were watching me. Loathing hardened their unblinking eyes. I was a threat to their security. They wanted me gone. Could I blame them? If I was in their position, I’d no doubt want the same. And if turning myself in meant preventing a war in which innocents could be killed, maybe I didn’t have a choice.

I cleared my dry throat, but Arnaud showed me his palm.

“I’m afraid I can’t accede to your request, Mayor,” he said.

I blinked in surprise. Several of the vampires hissed their protests.

“Why not?” the mayor demanded.

“Because I know a bluff when I hear one.”

Budge let out an aggrieved sigh. “You’re not leaving me much choice, then.”

“I’ll trust you to make the right call,” Arnaud said. “Your city is depending on you.”

Budge raised his voice. “Everson, if you’re there—”

“Good day, Mayor,” Arnaud said and disconnected the call. He signaled for Zarko to remove the phone from the conference room.

Around me, the vampires’ protests grew into bat-like shrieks. Without warning, something slammed into me. I toppled backwards in my chair and landed hard against the floor. The young-looking vampire was on top of me, pupils shrinking inside bright yellow irises, spiny teeth sprouting from his gums.

“You’ll get us killed!” he screamed, and lunged for my throat.

A fist knocked Damien off me. By the time I straightened, Arnaud

had the vampire pinned high against the wall. “Did I not say the wizard was under my protection?” he seethed, an inch from Damien’s twisting face. “Subvert my authority again, and you *will* be killed.”

Arnaud tossed the vampire aside and returned to the head of the table.

Damien shuffled back to his own seat, grumbling but chastised. The remaining vampires stopped screeching, their eyes shifting between me and Arnaud.

“My apologies,” Arnaud said as I stood and righted my chair. “My fellow executives are on edge, and perhaps understandably. There is much at stake. *However*…” He peered around the table. “…I know what I’m doing. The eradication program would eventually have included us all. That day has only been moved up, an opportunity we should be embracing, not wringing our hands over like Nervous Nellies. The city has no intention of sparing us and never did. So now comes the question.” Arnaud leveled his eyes at me as I sat again. “Will you renew the Pact between our kinds and defend our rightful place in this city? Or will you bow to the fears and prejudices of humanity?”

His musky scent grew inside the room, making my heart slam harder. I raised my eyes to the satellite image. The gunboats Arnaud had mentioned earlier were rushing in to surround lower Manhattan.

“I need to know your endgame,” I said.

“There’s a fitting quote, Mr. Croft: ‘War is the continuation of politics by other means.’” He gave an almost paternal smile. “Don’t be fooled by the show of force. What’s happening is nothing more than politics writ large. All we need do is force a stalemate. Make it so further engagement will be too costly for the mayor’s reelection chances.”

“So your strategy is purely defensive?” I asked to be sure.

“We’ve nothing to gain by attacking the city,” he replied. “With a successful stand, we win by default. The mayor will have no choice but to seek a negotiated settlement. We may have to make a concession or two, yes, but we’ll find the ground on which we presently stand more solid. And that would include you, Mr. Croft, for whom the ground underfoot must feel like quicksand.”

“*Assuming* we’re successful,” I said.

“Trust me.” Arnaud’s eyes gleamed. “I’ve prepared for this day.”

A sick shiver passed through me. *Trust me.* As if I could ever trust someone so vile. But something in his words carried me back to my final meeting with Lady Bastet. There had been a moment when the mystic had stared into me, her third eye probing some future horizon. And what was it she’d said when she’d returned? Trust in the one you trust least?

I lowered my gaze back to Arnaud.

The one I trusted least was right in front of me.

“I’ll repeat my offer from the bar,” Arnaud said.

He reached into his shirt pocket and held out a silver band. His yellowing talons scraped as he turned the signet around to face me. I stared at a rearing dragon. Grandpa’s ring. He was offering to return it to me. All I had to do was renew the strategic alliance between our kinds.

Trust in the one you trust least.

I clenched my jaw. How in the hell could I trust a monster?

“What say you?” Arnaud pressed.

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26

I eyed the ring Arnaud's blood slave had broken my finger to remove. Containing the power of the Brasov Pact, the ring was a deterrent against vampire aggression. If I renewed the Pact, that power would only be enhanced. Arnaud and his ilk wouldn't be able to touch me.

"The offer will not stand forever," Arnaud said.

My legs tensed, as though to stand and claim the ring, but the rational part of my mind resisted. Aligning with Arnaud might mean protection, but at what cost? I would be committing to a war against City Hall as well as the werewolves, maybe even the fae. And something told me it wouldn't play out as neatly as Arnaud was forecasting.

Trust in the one you trust least. Lady Bastet's remembered words again.

Around me, Arnaud's musk was strengthening, stoking my adrenaline. I was having trouble breathing. As the ring glinted out in front of me, I felt pressed in from all sides.

"I need to make a phone call," I blurted out.

"To whom?" Arnaud asked, watching me for a lie.

"Detective Vega."

"For what purpose?"

My gaze moved around the table. I couldn't reason in here. My thoughts were slamming together. I needed to know what was happening outside, and Vega would give it to me straight.

"Information," I answered.

"Look at the screen, Mr. Croft. There is all the information you need."

"It will only take a minute."

Arnaud closed his fist around the ring. "Very well," he said. "Through that door you will find a small office with a phone. You have exactly one minute."

I stared at him, making sure I'd heard him right.

"Run along," he said. "The second hand is ticking."

I hurried through the door he'd indicated and closed it behind me. A conference phone sat on one end of a desk. For a moment I

considered calling Caroline, but I doubted her offer to help me still stood. Besides, there was too much she hadn't told me, and I wasn't going to waste my one minute on more vagueness. I pulled Detective Vega's business card from my wallet and dialed her cell.

"Vega," she answered.

"Before you say anything, let me explain—"

"Croft," she whispered. "What in the hell are you doing?"

"I ended up at Arnaud's, yeah. But listen, listen, listen," I said over the expected outburst. "I didn't have a choice. The wolves caught my scent. I got trapped in the subway tunnels and had nowhere to go but downtown. His men grabbed me at the Wall." All true on the surface.

She was quiet for a moment. "You're okay?"

"For right now," I said. "How about you?"

"Yeah. Told the officers you kicked my gun away and jumped out the window. But what in the hell are you gonna do now?"

"How bad is it out there?" I asked.

"On a scale of one to ten? Twenty. We've got just about every piece of military equipment aimed at the Financial District. There are some in the chain who want to start blasting."

"Where are you?"

"Police Plaza … inactive duty because of my knee."

The acidic churning in my stomach abated slightly. Vega wouldn't be involved in any fighting. "The mayor made Arnaud an offer," I said. "Turn me over and he'll pull back, quash the vampire rumors."

Vega snorted. "Budge would have a better chance putting out a volcano with a bucket of water."

That was what I'd been afraid of.

"The story's already caught fire, huh?" I asked.

"Put it this way. If you're looking for a crucifix or bulb of garlic, every store in the five boroughs sold out this morning." She lowered her voice further. "And the government security guards, Croft. They're working with the NYPD in ways I've never seen."

"The werewolves," I muttered. "Who's in charge?"

"Hard to say. Cole is down at command-and-control, but this feels higher up the chain. I could try to—"

"No, no," I said, seeing where she was going. "You've already helped me enough."

She'd also given me the straight answers I needed. Arnaud was right, dammit. The city meant war.

"I don't know how to tell you this, Croft. But you're trapped."

"Yeah," I said, sighing. "I'm starting to see it that way too."

There was another pause on her end. "Listen," she said, "you make some really aggravating decisions sometimes, but you try to do right. I know what they're saying about you is bullshit."

I thought about how that aggravation ran both ways but was too touched by her words to say it.

"Thanks, Vega. That means a lot. Especially coming from you."

"Just—" she started, but the room shook and the line went dead.

"Vega?"

A growing rumble sounded outside, like thunder. I hung up and returned to the conference room. On the flat-screen television, a white cloud had appeared among the skyscrapers. An answering explosion sounded, and one of the helicopters burst into flames. It went down in Battery Park, creating another small plume. More shots thudded and boomed.

"The war has begun," Arnaud said. "It is now or never, Mr. Croft."

The vampires along both sides of the table were watching the screen in rapt attention. But opposite me, Arnaud was holding out the ring again.

"Hey, uh, shouldn't we get out of the top of the tower?" I said.

Arnaud didn't answer. His eyes sharpened and pressed into mine.

Trust in the one I least trusted? It wasn't like I had a goddamned choice anymore.

"All right," I said, my stomach in a nauseating fist. "I agree to renew the Pact."

Across Arnaud's lips, a smile clicked on and off. He set the ring flat on the table and slid it toward me. The ring bisected the eight vampires and came to a rest in front of me. I pushed it on. The ring fit as I'd remembered, squeezing the base of my middle finger. A chill energy coursed down my body, and I imagined it circling the room, binding us all in the agreement.

The conference room shook again.

"The mayor has made the opening move," Arnaud announced. "Phase one of the war has begun. Go now. Assemble your slaves. Be ready to mobilize them. This is for our very existence, gentlemen."

Arnaud spoke with the authority of a general. The vampires stood and filed from the room, the Undertaker's eyes lingering on me. My attention remained fixed on the screen. Several of the tanks were in flames, and two sections of the Wall appeared to be smoldering.

"Come, Mr. Croft," Arnaud said. "Let's go to my office for a live view."

Zarko appeared and opened the conference room door for us. I pulled my gaze from the screen and fell in behind Arnaud. We followed Zarko to the end of the hallway, where he opened the office door. As I stepped past him and onto the plush carpet, I thought about my two prior visits. The first time, Arnaud had nearly sunk his teeth into my throat before banning me from the Financial District. The second time, he had coerced me into a deal that had led to Vega's son

being imperiled.

Third time's a charm? I thought cynically.

I joined Arnaud beside the window that took up the far wall. Through the brown-tinted glass, we looked over the battlefield. Smoke billowed here and there, probably from artillery fire and downed helicopters. Along the Wall, automatic weapons popped. Gas jetted out as an antitank missile took flight. Its target, an armored vehicle rolling down Broadway, exploded in flames.

"Sadly, it's a recurring scene in our history," Arnaud remarked, as though watching a television documentary. "A city come to storm the fortress walls, to drive our kind from their midst. But that is the advantage of immortality, no? One eventually knows what to expect."

Zarko appeared with two glasses of scotch. I shook my head, but Arnaud accepted his glass and took a thoughtful sip. I looked over at him, incredulous. How could he be indulging at a time like this?

A helicopter chopped past our view, gunfire bursting from a pair of muzzles. I shouted and reared back.

Arnaud swirled his glass. "At ease, Mr. Croft. The windows are made of reinforced laminate. The building is similarly blast resistant. It would take several direct hits for us to become imperiled, and the city's forces presently have their hands full."

The helicopter appeared again, this time spiraling beneath a trail of black smoke. Below us, it collided into a neighboring skyscraper, fire mushrooming from the impact site.

I peered up at the sky. "What's to stop them from dropping a giant bomb?"

"Resources, for one. I doubt they have anything like that in their arsenal. Money, for another. It's already going to cost the mayor a pretty piece of his budget to restore Central Park. Now imagine having to rebuild lower Manhattan from the ground up. Not even the federal government will spot the city that kind of capital." City Hall was hidden by a cluster of intervening skyscrapers, but a wedge of its park peered out. By the tenting, I guessed there was some construction going on. "No, the initial assault is meant to punch some holes in our defenses in preparation for the next wave," Arnaud went on. "Ah, and here it comes."

I squinted past the Wall. Though I didn't possess Arnaud's preternatural vision, I could see the tide of foot soldiers racing down the north-south corridors. More than a hundred of them. And too fast to be humans.

"Werewolves?" I asked.

"I knew Penny was amassing an army before her untimely bullet wound, but I must applaud her ambition. She apparently got her hands on some enchanted item or other. A half wolf couldn't have

managed this kind of control otherwise."

Automatic fire popped from the Wall. The advancing wolves were undeterred, converging toward several sections of the Wall that looked to have been damaged by tank fire.

"You, ah, planned for this, right?" I asked.

"The wolves, yes," Arnaud said, taking another sip of scotch. "But not necessarily the numbers. We're looking at the population of much of New England. It seems we're going to be getting our hands dirty, after all." Without looking, he handed his half-empty glass over his shoulder, where Zarko was standing. "Come," he said to me. "You too, Zarko."

"Hey, uh, I'm sort of weaponless."

With Grandpa's ring secure on my finger, I was no longer so concerned about the vampires. Werewolves were another story. Arnaud stopped and looked me up and down.

"I may have something for you in the armory," he said.

"Armory?"

Without a word, he and Zarko sped from the office. I pursued them down the corridor and into the elevator. We descended and stepped into a bunker-like basement. I had to run to keep up as they traversed a long corridor. Another elevator carried us up a short distance.

We stepped out into a warehouse-sized space. Colonies of blood slaves moved among rows of storage shelves. They no longer wore business attire, but suits of glittering chainmail. Several carried medieval weapons. As if silently summoned, one of the blood slaves darted over and stopped in front of us, chainmail hugging his body like a second skin.

"Isn't it beautiful? Titanium-silver alloy." Arnaud ran his fingers across the blood slave's chest, which, along with the shoulders and neck of his suit, featured extra plating. I noted he was wearing a blue armband with the corporate logo for Chillington Capital. In his hands, the slave clasped a pair of punching daggers—also silver. "Neither of our kinds react well to the element," Arnaud went on, "but it is especially toxic to wolves. Imagine their shock when they seize this man by the throat. Zarko, be a dear and find a suit for our friend."

Zarko bowed. "This way, Mr. Croft."

I followed him to an open dressing room with racks and racks of armor. Locker room-type benches crossed the space in rows. Zarko left and reappeared a moment later with a chain mail suit.

"I believe this is your size," he said.

I accepted the suit and stripped down to my shirt and boxers. The suit was cold going over my skin, but much lighter than I'd expected. Zarko turned me around several times, tugging the chainmail here and there, before securing the waist with a thick leather belt. I sat to don

the chainmail shoes. When I stood again, I jogged in place and circled my arms a few times.

"Not bad," I said. "What about offense?"

Zarko led me to the other end of the room, past racks of conventional weapons, to a display case that stood apart from the others. "These belonged to wizards once," he said.

"Donations, I assume?"

I could feel Zarko's grin behind me as I peered down at the items. There were wands of various woods and sizes, which I immediately eliminated from consideration—they took too long to train. No amulets for me, either. God only knew what kinds of enchantments hid inside them. I moved down to the weapons. There were no sword canes, but my gaze lingered on a pair of maces. I opened the case's glass lid and picked one up. It was light in my grasp, easy to wield. I looked over the flanged metal head. Its ambient energy suggested silver in the alloy. Between the sharp edges were cloudy blue stones, five in all.

I held the mace away from me and said, *"Illuminare."*

The weapon stiffened in my grip as a new energy coursed through it. The stones glowed, dimmed, and then burst with blue light. With another Word, I willed the light into a shield. I moved the mace into various defensive positions, assessing the shield for strength.

After another moment, I nodded and dispersed it.

I reached into the case for the second mace, this one featuring a single blue stone at the weapon's apex. I looked from the stone to a blood slave trotting past in full armor.

"A test?" I asked Zarko.

"Very well," he replied.

I aimed the mace at the armored blood slave and shouted, *"Vigore!"*

Like with the other mace, this one took a moment to process the peculiarities of my energy. Following a brief sputter, the weapon kicked in my hand and channeled the force. The emerging blast nailed the blood slave in the side and sent him skittering across the floor.

"I can use these," I said, fitting the maces into my leather belt.

Though not my sword and staff, they were worthy replacements. I glanced over the rest of the weapons, but nothing grabbed me. Beyond the end of the display case, a large round door stood in a steel section of wall. It looked like the entrance to a bank vault.

"What's in there?" I asked.

"Our contingency plan, Mr. Croft."

I turned at Arnaud's voice to find the vampire transformed. Gone were the beige playboy suit and Italian leather shoes. He strode up in full armor, a burgundy cape flowing behind him. Banded mail

gleamed over his forearms and chest. Beneath his chainmail suit, which flared into a long skirt, metal boots rang over the floor in a martial rhythm. He could have been Vlad the Impaler, on whom the original legend of Dracula was based.

"Contingency?" A horrible thought struck me.

"I know you believe me a monster," Arnaud said, picking up on the emotion, "but even I have my limits. As a werewolf-vampire hybrid she would have made a powerful weapon, yes, but you will not find my daughter inside. She is far, far from here. And though I'd rather not say where that is or what she is doing, I assure you that the mayor would be proud."

I relaxed at the knowledge that Alexandra was safe, likely in school somewhere.

"As for the contingency, there *is* an element of kinship there, I suppose." Arnaud lowered a studded metal helmet over his mane of white hair. His pale, predatory eyes peered from a pair of slanted holes. "Though let's hope we never need it," he said. "Have you found what you needed?"

I nodded, touching my two maces. "This is just a defensive stand, right?"

"Asserting our rightful place in the city," Arnaud reaffirmed. "Men!"

The blood slaves fell into formation behind him. From a side room, two more slaves appeared, straining to lead an armored warhorse. I stepped back as the giant black animal snorted and reared its head. I could see by its sunken red eyes that it had joined the ranks of the undead.

Arnaud accepted the reins and climbed deftly onto the horse's gilded saddle. Another blood slave handed up a long sword, which Arnaud held at his side. He trotted the horse toward a barren wall opposite the elevators. The rest of us followed. The horse stopped in front of the wall and pawed the floor with a thick hoof, its coat covered in an oily lather. From deep inside the wall, a pair of clunks sounded. Without warning, the entire wall fell out before a set of heavy iron chains caught it.

Black smoke and battle sounds flooded in. Through a hazy light, I could make out several downtown buildings. One was on fire. The wall clanked out the rest of the way, like a drawbridge.

Arnaud canted his head toward me. "Try to stay close, Mr. Croft."

The wall banged down to become part of a broad ramp that descended to Wall Street. Arnaud raised his sword straight overhead and aimed it forward. "To battle!" he cried as the horse charged outside.

"To battle!" the blood slaves echoed and followed.

I joined them, and we poured down the ramp.

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Led by a vampire on an undead horse, our nightmare force emerged onto Wall Street. Around us, stone buildings rose steeply into smoke and coughing antiaircraft fire.

In the adrenaline-pumping confusion, it took me a moment to get my bearings. The Federal Hall building coming up on our right helped. It was the site of the fae's lower portal. The vampires' security forces and blood slaves that ringed the building were facing inward, in case anything tried to come through.

We veered left, pulling my eyes from the building. *South?*

"I thought the fight was at the Wall!" I shouted up at Arnaud.

"The other executives are taking their battalions there," Arnaud said. "However, there's been a breach in the subway line. A pack of wolves mean to attack from the rear. We'll head them off at Bowling Green Plaza."

Though Arnaud wore an earpiece, he used it to communicate with his human security forces—the vampires were psychically linked to one another as well as to their slaves. So when Arnaud shouted for his battalion to split up, I understood the verbal order to be for effect. He was enjoying playing general. The slaves coursed around us like quicksilver, disappearing into the canyons that ran every which way in the oldest section of the city.

"Your hand," Arnaud called, reaching toward me.

I seized his plated arm shield, and he hefted me up behind him. I seized him around the waist, the muscles of the horse's flanks surging like giant pistons. We emerged onto Broadway. Ahead, an attack helicopter pivoted around and came at us low. In a deafening burst, gunfire blew up chunks of asphalt.

"They're trying to strafe us!" I shouted.

Before the lines of blown asphalt could reach us, Arnaud pulled the steed left, onto a narrow side street. The helicopter roared past. An explosive bout of antiaircraft fire sounded behind us.

The horse snorted and sprinted on.

"It seems the wolves are emerging," Arnaud said over his shoulder.

He took a sharp right, and the small gated park near the Bowling Green station appeared ahead of us. Werewolves in their creature

forms were bounding up from the subway entrance and emptying onto the brick plaza outside the green. Blood slaves swarmed in to meet them.

With the preternatural speed of both creatures, the action was hard to follow. Claws and teeth flashed, blades glinted, smoke and blood erupted from locked and rolling bodies.

The blood slaves were outsized but not outmuscled.

Before I was ready, Arnaud charged his warhorse into the park. I worked one of the maces free from my belt while holding tight to Arnaud. The werewolves were wearing what looked like Kevlar suits, but Arnaud found their vulnerabilities with swift, precise strokes of his sword. I watched one werewolf fall away, his decapitated head hanging on by a thread of sinew. The horse trampled the wolf's body. Other wolves retreated from the bite of Arnaud's sword to regenerate —only to be piled on by blood slaves armed with punching daggers.

But for every wolf that fell dead, two more seemed to appear from the subway.

I twisted one way and the other, swinging the mace desperately. One blow caught a wolf across the jaw. Blood blew from his mouth like spindrift. Slaves pulled the wolf from the horse's right flank, where he'd embedded his claws. I nailed another wolf behind the ear.

This is insane, I thought, swinging at a third lunging wolf. *I need eyes on every side of my head.*

By sheer luck, I glanced up in time to catch something plummeting toward the park.

"Protezione!" I cried.

The mace stiffened in my grasp and a blue shield appeared around us an instant before the mortar impacted to our right. The blast kicked us to the side, burying us in a wave of stone dust. Wolves and blood slaves that had been thrown skyward thudded down around us.

The horse bellowed, hooves hammering the blood-slick bricks as it struggled to stay upright. I squeezed Arnaud tighter as he fought to bring the horse around. A second mortar landed, slamming into the park on our other side. The horse was blown from its feet, and I lost my hold. I rolled over several times, coming to a rest against a mangled blood slave.

I peeked above his body. Through the thinning haze, I could make out the old U.S. Custom House across the plaza. I drew the other mace from my belt. The stone steps to the entrance would give me higher ground and protection from the rear. I'd be in a better position to cast.

Shouting to reinforce my shield, I crossed the plaza at a run, ears still ringing from the twin blasts. I veered around blood slaves grappling with giant wolves and pounded up the steps. At a landing where a pair of columns climbed the building's tall edifice, I turned to

take in the scene from my new vantage.

Not good.

Arnaud and the blood slaves had recovered from the mortar shells and were re-engaging the wolves, but there must have been a second breach. A new wolf horde was swarming in from the east.

"Arnaud!" I shouted.

From his mount, the vampire turned his blood-streaked face. The eyes that met mine burned red from his helmet. Sword poised above his billowing cape, he could have been an angel of death. Arnaud wheeled the mount toward where I was pointing and saw the new front. From windows in the surrounding buildings, gunfire erupted. The vampires' private security force!

Several wolves tumbled from the charge. Blood slaves not entangled formed a wall to meet the rest, but the slaves were still outnumbered. And that wasn't the worst of it—a third werewolf horde was coming in on their blind side. Who in the hell was coordinating them? And how?

"Forza dura!" I bellowed.

Power stormed from my mace and hit the incoming wave. Wolves were lifted from their feet and slammed into buildings. Several of the gunmen above switched their aim, lighting up the fallen beasts.

The rest of the wolves recovered quickly. They split up, one group scaling the buildings to reach the gunmen, a second group bounding toward the battle in the green. From that group, half a dozen wolves splintered away and veered toward me.

I checked my shield and set my legs. I'd spaced out my invocations enough to keep Thelonious at bay and to allow my power time to recharge. My magic still held plenty of steel. And whether it was the rush of battle or the sum of my frustrations, I was burning to let that steel rip.

"Who's first?" I shouted at the charging wolves.

I didn't get the chance to find out. From around both sides of the Custom House, a new force appeared. Clad in the same chainmail as the foot soldiers in Arnaud's battalion, the blood slaves wore green armbands that bore the insignia of their vampire's firm. Bristling with swords and daggers, the slaves collapsed into the wolves at the base of the stairs.

The Undertaker galloped past them on a blood-red steed, a barbed lance braced between arm and armored chest. He grinned over at me before diving into the main battle. Wolves screamed as he skewered them two and three at a time and flung them from his path.

Never thought I'd be happy to see that creep, I thought.

I was looking for where I could help out when a snarl sounded below me. The giant red wolf that had been leading the charge shook

himself from the bloody melee and bounded up the steps. His baleful eyes fixed on mine as he slowed to a hunched stalk. I recognized those eyes.

I met Evan's stare. "You miss your dead brother, huh? Maybe I can fix that."

The challenge pierced his human and animal mind, and he sprang. I brought a mace around and slammed him with a shield invocation. He staggered back, then lunged again. I met him with a Word —*"Respingere!"*—and blew him aside, his back cracking against the base of a statue.

"Is that all you've got?" I asked.

Anger seethed in Evan's eyes as he circled out in front of me, looking for an opening.

I didn't wait. Thrusting one mace toward his legs, I hit him with a force blast. With the other mace, I brought the shield down on his head, pinning him against the landing. Evan snarled as he struggled to free himself. I walked toward him, shaping the shield into a stockade that wrapped his neck and wrists. Blood soaked his coat as he barked and thrashed, fury engorging his eyes. I honed the edges of the shield until they were razor sharp.

"Sorry, pal," I said. "Bad day for revenge."

I raised the other mace and, with a force invocation as a propellant, brought it crashing down on the back of his skull. The metal flanges sank into bone, and the wolf's head sheared off at his neck. I dispersed the stockade as the wolf's two parts thudded to the ground.

Blowing out my breath, I lifted my gaze to the battle. One less wolf, but still plenty more. Several had reached the gunmen in the windows and were hurling them to their deaths. The rest swarmed the plaza and park. Arnaud and the Undertaker fought with their mounts back to back, the Undertaker wielding a black broadsword now. But even with the reinforcements, we were outnumbered—and losing. I watched the way the wolves moved, ever shifting and reassembling, concentrating their attack where the vampires were weakest.

I looked around, trying to pick out whomever was coordinating them.

Did werewolves have the same psychic linkup as vampires? I didn't think so. Which meant…

My gaze dropped to the severed head at my feet. In the hair around the wolf's ear, I spotted what I was looking for. After ensuring no wolves were coming, I knelt and worked my fingers into the blood-matted hair. A crescent-shaped band had been affixed behind his ear. I worked the band free. With it came two slender filaments, one emerging from the wolf's ear canal. That filament ended at a small

speaker. Very carefully, I brought it to my own ear.

"…Alpha Three, move now. Flank them north. Alpha One … south … bef…"

The tinny voice crackled as my wizard's aura killed the communication device. But I had already recognized the voice's cadence. I examined the other filament, which ended at a dead lens.

Well, hello there, Captain, I thought and tossed the smoking device aside.

That explained the coordination between the NYPD and wolves. But Captain Cole would have to be lupine himself to command them, and I'd never sensed an aura around him. I thought about the powerful enchantment Arnaud had mentioned and remembered the ring with the dark gem Cole wore on his pinky finger. Besides controlling the wolves, it must have concealed his own wolf nature.

Across the plaza, the ferocious battle raged on. Arnaud and the Undertaker continued to hack and slash, but their slave battalions were dwindling. The wolves were too well coordinated. I looked high and low.

Where are you, Cole?

I knew from our work on the eradication campaign that he liked to site himself near the action. And what Vega had said on the phone about him being "down" at command-and-control seemed to confirm he was close. But how close?

I thought back to the view from Arnaud's office window earlier. That tenting I'd glimpsed at the southern end of City Hall Park … I had assumed it was part of a construction project, but it was the same military-drab color as the tenting used in the other campaigns.

That's where he was, I decided. Close to the campaign but shielded by the intervening skyscrapers.

I cupped my hands to the sides of my mouth. "Arnaud!"

The vampire discerned my voice amid the chaos and looked up. His mount reared as he swung it toward me, hacking and trampling a swath from the battle. I met him at the bottom of the steps. He was covered in gore, his mane of hair soaked in blood. Aiming a mace, I blasted back a pair of wolves that had broken from the battle to pursue him.

"You've found something?" Arnaud asked.

"There's a tent at the southern end of City Hall Park," I panted. "Captain Cole is inside, coordinating the assault. He's the one controlling the wolves."

Arnaud's eyes sharpened in understanding. But as he activated his earpiece, I thought about the police officers and technicians who would also be in the tent. And if Vega had ended up there for any reason…

“Wait!” I said. “No mass casualties. Have a sniper take him out.”

Arnaud nodded and gave the order. His blood-bathed horse snorted, eager to rejoin the battle. I looked past Arnaud in time to see the Undertaker and his mount falling. The aging vampire’s wailing cries rose above the snarls and barks of the wolves diving down to tear into him.

With the Undertaker’s final moan, his blood slaves regained their mortality and stopped fighting. The ones he’d turned centuries before shriveled and broke apart. The younger ones aged, some crooking into the shapes of old men, others staring around in shock, wondering what kind of nightmare they had awakened to. The wolves showed no mercy.

Arnaud’s remaining slaves continued to battle fiercely, but the force had been halved. A mass of wolves, more than a hundred strong, turned toward us. Arnaud’s mount grunted and stamped the bricks at its feet. I squeezed the leather-bound grips of my maces.

“Stay behind me,” Arnaud said, raising his sword.

The wolves’ grizzly snouts peeled from their fanged teeth.

I threw up a shield invocation, knowing it would only buy us a few minutes. There were too damned many. They charged en masse—then stuttered to a stop. Muzzles lifted to the scents of death and carnage, then began to sniff one another, growls rippling in their chests.

“It seems you were right,” Arnaud said. “I just received word the captain was taken out. An inter-pack alliance on this scale is unnatural. I suspect we’re about to see it unravel.”

A savage bark sounded, and a wolf seized another by the throat. More barks erupted as wolves from rival packs clashed, claws and teeth ripping into one another.

“Encircle them!” Arnaud called to the surviving blood slaves.

The slaves complied, several limping into position on mangled legs. The battle among the wolves was as brutal as it was quick. As maimed wolves attempted to escape their attackers, the blood slaves drove silver weapons into them. This went on until the final wolf was slain.

I relaxed my tensed arms as my gaze ranged over the slaughter. At the edge of the park, the Undertaker’s mount had been dismembered, the Undertaker no doubt somewhere among the remains.

“Poor Luther,” Arnaud said without a trace of sympathy. “It seems the rest of us will have to divide his assets.” He looked down at me. “Well done, Mr. Croft. The assault on the Wall has disintegrated as well, I’m told.”

“So … what now?” I asked.

“We return to my offices and await the mayor’s call.”

“It’s over?”

“Listen. Do you hear that?”

I stopped breathing and immediately understood what he meant. No shooting. No explosions. No shouts, snarls, or death cries. A deep, snowy silence had descended over lower Manhattan.

“It’s the sound of success,” he said, grinning. “Come, let us negotiate the terms of our future. Swiftly now.”

Arnaud extended an arm toward me.

Ready for the alliance to end, I clasped his blood-caked hand and straddled the mount.

“Let’s go,” I said.

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Trailed by the remaining blood slaves in Arnaud's battalion, we rode back to Wall Street. Fires burned here and there. Chunks of building littered several of the streets. But except for the crackling of the horse's hooves over glass, the downtown remained eerily silent.

We turned a corner and came up on Federal Hall, with its pillared façade and bronze statue of George Washington. Blood slaves and private security forces still ringed the building. A handful of carcasses lay across the street—bullet-riddled wolves reverted to their human forms—telling me the bulk of their attack had not penetrated the core of the Financial District.

"Anything?" Arnaud called up.

Several of the security forces stared back with shield sunglasses and shook their heads.

It looked as though the fae had stayed out of this one, which was not overly surprising. When it came to human affairs, their M.O. was to operate just out of sight, advising here, injecting money there. And they tended not to use magic unless threatened. The anxiety that Caroline and I might become actual adversaries let out a little. I exhaled a shaky breath as two more depleted slave battalions appeared, both led by vampires on horseback.

Arnaud trotted up to the closer group. "I understand we lost two defending the Wall."

The mounted vampire, who was too battle spattered for me to recognize, nodded. "Francis went down near the West Side Highway," he said. "Gordon was impaled on Maiden Lane."

"Victory always comes at a cost." Arnaud said.

The vampire farther back galloped forward. "Why stop here?" he demanded, eyes blazing inside his helmet. I recognized the young vampire, Damien, by his voice. "There remains a city to conquer!"

Arnaud looked as though he was going to respond, no doubt to talk him down, but he canted his head suddenly. I followed the vampire's gaze toward Federal Hall, where the security forces had fallen into crouches, automatic weapons aimed at the building. And then I heard it too—a dull, concussive sound, like something trying to pound its way out of a giant tomb.

The horses grunted and drew back.

"What's going on?" I asked, peering around.

The blood slaves looked jittery, eyes fixed on the building. A deep snap sounded, and then another. A member of the private security team emerged from beyond the pillars. "The slabs are fracturing," he barked. "Whatever's coming up is moving ten tons of reinforced concrete."

Coming up? The fae were sending something through the portal?

"Hold your positions!" Arnaud said severely, but I caught an odd strain in his voice. When his horse shuffled back another foot, Arnaud cracked its head with the pommel of his sword. "You too, cursed beast."

Arnaud must have had the portal sealed, but all manner of powerful beings dwelt in the faerie realm. Another pair of snaps sounded, followed by the unmistakable sound of heavy stone grating against heavy stone. From inside Federal Hall gunfire exploded. Other automatic weapons joined in. A man's scream rose above the noise and was just as suddenly strangled.

Anxiety sawed on my insides as I flipped through a mental reference of fae creatures.

Arnaud's men backed out between the pillars, guns cracking. A giant shadow pursued them. It wasn't until the shadow ducked beneath the pediment and rose to its full height that I recognized the iron-haired monstrosity.

"Oh, shit," I muttered.

"Does this present a problem, Mr. Croft?" Arnaud asked, holding his slaves back.

"A mountain troll?" I let out a harsh laugh. "Only if you expect to kill it."

I glimpsed the troll's volcanic gray face before he hefted an arm to keep the gunfire from his recessed eyes. With a grunt, he seized George Washington's upper body. Stone erupted from the foundation as the ten-foot-tall statue broke free. The troll wielded it overhead like a club, then swung it in a fierce arc, taking out two of the gunmen.

"Attack!" Arnaud called to his slaves.

Regenerated from their fight against the werewolves, the slaves surrounded the troll, blades glinting. Half a dozen of them slipped behind the creature, darted in—and exploded into flames.

For the first time, I noticed the way the air warped around the troll.

"It gets better," I shouted. "The troll's wrapped in some kind of enchantment, probably put there by the fae." An enchantment that torched the undead, apparently.

Leaving the blood slaves to burn, the troll bounded down the steps

with surprising speed, swinging the statue again. More gunmen went airborne, their bodies broken. The rest retreated around the corners of buildings. The troll puffed his cheeks. When he blew out, the fae aura bent with the force of the gust, igniting a swath of blood slaves ahead of him.

For the first time, Arnaud walked his horse back. I followed the angle of his head to where two more mountain trolls were emerging from Federal Hall, their stony bodies glimmering inside the fae enchantment.

"Wonderful," I muttered.

The trolls assessed the scene and split up, running after the blood slaves like they were chasing mice.

Damien, the young vampire, had seen enough. With a cry, he dug the metal spikes on his boots into his mount and charged. The statue-wielding troll turned toward the piercing sound and roared, revealing a set of tombstone teeth. Damien evaded his downward swing, the statue busting into the street behind him. He charged past the troll and sliced his sword at the tendinous pocket behind the monster's knee. The blade fractured into pieces. When Damien brought the horse around, I could see flames licking out from beneath his right gauntlet.

Damien's eyes burned red as he let out a furious scream. The troll lunged toward him.

"Vigore!" I shouted, aiming one of my maces. But the force that rippled through the air dissipated upon reaching the troll's enchanted protection. I thrust forth the other mace. *"Protezione!"*

The shield that manifested over Damien burst apart beneath the troll's descending fist. Damien's scream was severed as the blow crushed his head and battered him and his mount against the blacktop. Both broke into flames. The horse's legs kicked for several beats before falling still.

"My magic's no good!" I said. "And unless you have cold iron…" But Arnaud was already moving us away.

"Retreat!" he called, charging toward his building.

The wall we had emerged from earlier remained down. Our footfalls stampeded up the ramp and into the armory, a handful of gunmen at our backs blowing cover fire. I doubted it would do much against mountain troll hide. The bulk of us inside, the wall jerked from the ramp and embarked on a clanking rise as the chains retracted, pulling the wall back into place. Outside, the trolls ran toward us, their horny toenails gouging up chunks of asphalt.

"Quickly!" Arnaud called.

One of the trolls seized a gunman who'd been left behind. I looked away, but not before he'd pushed the gunman into his chomping mouth. The statue-wielding troll brought George Washington down on

a crippled blood slave, crushing him. He then swung the statue around, caving in the corner of a building across the street. The third troll broke into the lead and charged. The wall slammed closed ahead of his outstretched fingers.

A moment later, the armory shuddered around us. Weapons fell from shelves. The trolls were attacking the outside of the building. Blast-resistant stonework or not, the mountain trolls would eventually get inside or bring the entire building down on our heads.

Arnaud dismounted and helped me down. A pair of blood slaves led the torn and bloodied beast away. The other slaves traded their silver blades for ones forged from iron. Arnaud stared around for a moment. When his eyes locked on the other vampire's, I caught something I'd never observed in their kind before. Uncertainty. That uncertainty was also manifesting in their blood slaves, who, though freshly armed, backed from the shaking walls.

"Come, Mr. Croft," Arnaud snapped.

I followed him to the vault-like door I'd observed earlier. His contingency plan. Trepidation shook through me as he seized the hand wheel. The round door released from the wall with a dull bang and swung outward. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the tomb-like chamber.

What the…?

I had been expecting a creature of some kind. Instead, I was looking at an ornate casting circle painted on the floor in what looked like blood and bone dust. Dark candles stood at the points of the circle's star-shaped pattern. I raised my gaze to an altar above the circle. It featured an old iron chest about the size of a cinderblock, thick candles bracketing it. When I leaned toward the claustrophobic space, I picked up the stink of rancid blood.

Arnaud placed a chilly hand on my back. "I believe you'll find everything you need."

"Everything I need for what?"

The armory shook again, this time toppling several of the racks of weapons. Arnaud removed his helmet and shook out his hair. He looked as if he was wearing a grotesque mask, the dried blood thick over his jaw and around his eyes but absent from the rest of his pale face.

"I don't need to spell out our situation," he said when the noise settled. "I underestimated our opponents, or at least the lengths they were prepared to go. They have already decimated half our ranks. They mean to finish the job. Our only recourse now is the Scaig Box."

I studied the trunk on the altar. "Scaig Box?"

A cold force seemed to emanate from the word, like fingernails dragging across stone.

Outside, the pounding continued. A giant crack appeared in the drawbridge-like wall.

"Listen to me, Mr. Croft," Arnaud said quickly. "The box holds an ancient being, a precursor to vampirekind. We will use the being to destroy the trolls, then order it back into its hold."

I jerked away, understanding what he wanted. "Are you fucking insane? No, I'm not calling forth any *ancient being.* I'm forbidden for one, and for another … That thing's related to you? Yeah, no."

"You're bound by the Pact." Arnaud's eyes burned into mine.

"To aid you in battle, not unleash some ancient evil on the world."

"I know how summonings work," he pressed. "The circle I've prepared is extraordinarily powerful. The being will remain under *your* control. You can test the circle for yourself."

The armory shuddered again, rubble falling from a fresh proliferation of cracks. The image of the troll shoving the gunman into his mouth flashed through my mind.

I eyed the casting circle. Though it had elements that looked vaguely Sumerian, the pattern wasn't one I'd seen before. With a flick of my mace, I cast an ounce of energy toward it. The circle gobbled it up. A moment later, the pattern began to pulse like a heart, amplifying the energy several fold. Alright, so it passed the power test. But what in the hell would I be calling forth?

I raised my eyes to the iron trunk. It sat on its dark altar perch as though biding its time.

This had disaster written all over it.

"I hear more of them out there," Arnaud said above the thundering blows.

My heart slammed in my chest. It was only a matter of time, I got it. But summonings never worked out for me, from my first experience with Thelonious to nearly succumbing to a gatekeeper a few weeks ago. And then there was Chicory's warning—not only about the penalty for summoning, but why the Order forbade the practice. I could be opening a fissure…

To the Whisperer, I thought, *the being who nearly destroyed the Elders.*

"I can't do it," I said.

"Can't or won't?" Arnaud asked.

"It doesn't matter. It's not happening."

"What about your *mother?*" he asked, his narrow tongue spearing the word.

I stiffened. "What about her?"

"Well, if I understood your grandfather correctly, she was slaughtered like a little lamb. If you fall today, who's left to avenge her death?" Though he spoke softly, almost teasingly, I could smell his musk, could feel my already-racing pulse kicking into a higher gear.

He was inciting my anger.

"They've won," I said.

Arnaud stared at me. "I don't believe I heard you."

"There are creatures out there we can't kill," I said, "and a being in that box that might be even worse. Our best option is to contact City Hall, have the fae call off the trolls, and then see if we have any chips left to bargain with. If nothing else, it buys us time."

My mind made up, I turned toward the elevator.

"Oh, Mr. Croft," Arnaud said. "I did hope it wouldn't come to this."

I was still processing his words when he swooped in behind me and seized my wrists. The talons of his thumbs pierced the network of tendons below my palms, and my hands jerked open, dropping the maces.

Fear and anger spiked hot inside me. He was attacking me in violation of the Pact!

I twisted my right fist around until the ring was aimed at him. *"Balaur!"* I shouted.

The cold metal remained inert.

"You poor fool," he hissed in my ear. "Do you think I would hand you a loaded weapon? The design is identical, yes, and there are magnetic elements that might feel like power, but the ring is a worthless copy. Now," he said, steering me back toward the vault, "I believe we have a summoning to perform."

The son of a bitch had tricked me.

Furious, I snapped my head back to smash his face, but he was too quick. Far, far too quick. Cold breath brushed my exposed throat an instant before his spiny teeth plunged in.

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My eyes shot wide.

He's doing it. He's actually biting me.

In an instant, the piercing pain was replaced by a warmth that flooded my system, relaxing everything. It was like slipping into the warmest, most lavish bath. Though my mind struggled, my body relaxed into Arnaud's embrace, his high-pitched suckling. I couldn't stop him. Couldn't dam the endorphins dumping into my bloodstream. And that was the worst part. Despite the horror of what he was doing, my brain was flashing pleasure signals.

My eyelids fluttered, even as I strained to keep them open.

No, dammit! No, no, no!

I felt Arnaud slipping into my mind, growing inside it like a fluid-filled sac. He was turning me into one of his minions. I groped for my mental prism, found it, but couldn't summon the will to cast through it. Arnaud controlled that will now. And with it, he controlled me.

Arnaud broke away with a wet gasp.

He turned me until I was facing him, my blood glistening across his mouth like a lurid lip gloss. His swollen pupils narrowed to pin points. Wizard's energy pulsed around him.

I stared back dumbly.

"Be grateful, Mr. Croft," he said, releasing my wrist. "I could have taken far more."

I saw one of the maces on the floor at my feet. I felt myself stooping for it, seizing the leather-bound grip, swinging the silver-edged flanges into Arnaud's head. But, in fact, I hadn't moved, couldn't move.

Arnaud tsked. "What a cruel thing to want to do to your master."

He's inside my damn head, my thoughts.

"Indeed, I am," he said. "Behold."

Arnaud turned and walked toward the vault. I followed, my legs kicking into a series of jerky steps. I couldn't stop them. The vault swallowed us into its frigid hold. Arnaud stepped aside, and I fell to my knees inside the casting circle, as though thrust down. Arnaud moved in beside me.

"Cerrare," a foreign voice spoke.

No, *my* voice. The word had been spoken through my mouth.

Could Arnaud direct my magic? Certainly not. But energy was already pouring through my mental prism and down my body. The casting circle glowed with protective power. Flames sprouted from the candles.

That's why he held back, I thought. *Not out of charity, but to preserve my prism.*

"Den-lil lugal kur-kur-ra ab-ba."

Arnaud moved my lips and tongue around the Sumerian words.

"Re-ne-ke inim gi-na-ni-ta."

Ropey strands of dark energy sprang into being, linking Arnaud to the Scaig Box on the altar. The summoning was starting, and God only knew how it was going to end.

"Gir-su dsara-bi ki e-ne-sur."

The trunk stirred. Something inside strained against the hinges, but they were bound by a powerful magic. Hope found a fingerhold inside me. Maybe the binding magic would be too strong for me to dispel. But the magic was familiar. Like the long-forgotten scent of a childhood home, I felt the magic resonating on a limbic level. I'd sensed it before.

"Yes," Arnaud whispered. "Your grandfather sealed this box, centuries ago. Only someone of his bloodline can unseal it. How fortunate that I found you—or more accurately, that you found me."

What in the world's in there?

"A forebear, Mr. Croft."

"Ensi ummaki-ke nam inim-ma."

The magical binding released in a pair of audible pops.

"Soon, the city will look on me as a god."

"Diri-diri-se e-ak!"

The lid cannoned open and a horrible shadow rose. It took form above the trunk, unfurling a pair of ragged black wings. A black bat's face squinted down at us, fangs jutting up from its lower jaw. I'd been right to be wary. Arnaud had just summoned a shadow fiend.

"Arnaud Thorne," the fiend said in a voice that sounded like a rusty nail being drawn from wood. "You dare call me forth after hundreds of years of neglect. Hundreds of years in which I've foundered in the blackest shadows. Why should I not destroy you here and now?"

I expected Arnaud to cower from the towering creature. Instead, he stepped forward.

"I am protected, for one," he replied from inside the circle. "And two, I have bound you to me."

The fiend's eyes burned as it raised a taloned hand.

"Gal bi-su!" Arnaud had me shout.

The ropey umbilicus connecting him to the fiend looped around the creature's neck, becoming a barbed collar. The fiend's hands flew to its throat as Arnaud tugged the cord. Arnaud yanked again, and the massive fiend fell to the floor, as though it were bowing before the vampire.

"Any attempt to harm me will redound on you a hundredfold," Arnaud said. "Are we clear?"

The fiend's face twisted in evident pain. "I will obey."

I looked on, horrified. Combining the ancient ritual with my power, Arnaud had taken complete control over the entity. And something told me Arnaud had larger ambitions beyond troll killing.

"Get up," he commanded.

The being flapped to its feet. "What is your bidding?"

Arnaud's eyes cut toward me, and I could see the calculation in them. He had what he wanted: the Scaig Box opened, the shadow fiend in his command. He was no longer dependent on my magic. And that wasn't all. Arnaud's access to my thoughts ran both ways. Before he could cover the keyhole on his end, I saw the full extent to which he had manipulated me.

Everson, I thought, *you ever-loving idiot.*

Late last night, Arnaud learned the mayor's wife had succumbed to the bullet I'd lodged in her aorta. Penelope Lowder was dead. With the head of the werewolves gone, he saw an opportunity. The false story about me working for the vampires hadn't been planted by the fae and City Hall. The timing of the story—on the heels of the Central Park disaster—had only made it seem that way.

The story had been planted by Arnaud.

It was brilliant, really. Drive me to him, force the city into a confrontation, and then use my powers to unleash his fiend. The coordinated werewolf attack *had* surprised him. He hadn't known Cole was the second wolf in command. The captain had fooled us both, apparently. But with that battle won, Arnaud's plan was back on track. And the fae's response helped—or so he thought. He had believed the trolls would convince me to summon the shadow fiend.

They hadn't, and so here we were.

"The mayor was already threatening to end my empire," Arnaud said, having followed my thoughts. "I merely forced his hand. And now that he has sown the wind, his city shall reap the whirlwind. Remember what I told you, Mr. Croft. 'War is the continuation of politics by other means.' So too is terror. Rise, please." When he gestured, my body jerked like a marionette, and I was on my feet. "And step outside the circle."

I fought with everything I had—the circle was my only defense against the shadow fiend—but it was no use. My right leg broke

through the circle's humming border, breaking it. My left leg followed.

Arnaud had his control over the creature to protect him, but I was exposed now. Nightmare images ripped through my mind as the fiend crawled toward me, its dreadful eyes boring into mine. It reeked of sulfur and carrion. I tried to squint away but couldn't even do that.

Beyond the vault's entrance, gunfire erupted in fresh bursts. A large stone shot past.

Arnaud sighed. "It seems the trolls have made their way inside. Come," he said, jerking the fiend by the collar toward the vault door. "I have work for you."

I could only stare as the immense being rose and drifted past me.

"We shouldn't be long, Mr. Croft," Arnaud said. "Call if you need anything."

His fangs grinned through my drying blood as he slammed the door closed, extinguishing the candles and sealing me in blackness.

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I'd read that an attack from a shadow fiend was like being disemboweled while having your brains sucked out through the back of your skull—the victim conscious the entire time. I almost pitied the trolls. Beyond the thick wall of the vault, I heard the first one being set upon, his grunts and roars followed by an unearthly scream and then a foundation-shaking collapse.

In the darkness, I felt over the metal door. Arnaud was no longer in direct control of me, but I couldn't cast, dammit. It was as though my prism was stranded in the middle of a huge chasm. I doubted I'd be able to raise a hand against Arnaud, either. I was his slave now. Maybe not to the degree of the others, but still doomed to serve him. Until his fiend killed me.

The inside of the door was smooth metal, nothing to grasp or turn. I put my shoulder to it and shoved, but I'd heard the giant magnets engage after the door had swung closed. It wasn't going anywhere.

Another troll screamed. The vault shook with his collapse.

Okay, calm down, I told myself. *Relax. Remember your training.*

I heard Lazlo's voice from years before. *A wizard who cannot cast is a dead wizard.*

Leaning my arms against the door, I inhaled through my nose and exhaled through pursed lips. I recited my centering mantra.

After several cycles, I saw it wasn't going to work. Arnaud had siphoned out too much of me. The distance between where I stood and where I needed to be remained too vast.

Arnaud was the bridge, and unless he commanded it, I couldn't cast.

I straightened and pulled my coin pendant from beneath the collar of my shirt. I ran my thumb over the symbol. It was the first magical item of his Grandpa had given me, the only one he'd given me while still alive. I'd acquired the sword and ring after his death—*and managed to lose both*, I thought bitterly. Right now, the ring's loss was the more damning.

The coin's metal pulsed warmly in my hand.

As I considered its round shape, I thought about Grandpa's penchant for acquiring things in pairs: tools, slippers, straight razors.

To have an immediate replacement, my grandmother had said.

What about the Brasov Pact? Grandpa hadn't owned a second ring, but he would have wanted a backup. My thumb made another pass over the symbol. The coin could cast light and protect against lesser beings. Might Grandpa have also instilled it with the power of the Pact? It was the only other wearable ornament he'd possessed.

As though in answer, the coin let out another pulse.

Hope kicked inside me. Yes, the enchantment was buried, but it was in there! I could feel it! It was just a matter of manifesting enough magic to access the enchantment, to release its power.

"Illuminare," I said, concentrating into the coin. I waited for several moments before repeating the word. But no energy stirred. No light shone forth. The vault remained as dark as my situation.

I twisted off the fake ring Arnaud had given me and threw it with all of my strength. "Goddammit!" I shouted, the echoes seeming to chase the clattering ring around the vault before both fell silent. With my back to the door, I slid to the vault floor, landing with a rustle of chainmail.

Another troll's scream pierced the vault.

I closed my eyes. Backup or no backup, I was powerless to cast. The vampire had won.

Checkmate.

I could search the vault in the hopes of finding something to use as a weapon. Perhaps the iron trunk the shadow fiend had emerged from. I could stand to one side of the door and await Arnaud's return. I could bring the trunk down on his head, or attempt to. And it would all be for nothing. At every turn, Arnaud had been a dozen steps ahead of me. He'd enticed me, repelled me, vexed me, possessed me—all moves in a complex dance that he'd been leading the entire time. He hadn't come this far to be foiled by a box on his head.

Exhaling, I muttered, "Trust in the one you trust least."

I cast back to that final moment with Lady Bastet. I remembered the feel of the stone table beneath my forearms, the tendrils of incense in the air, the strand of my mother's hair. I remembered Lady Bastet staring into me, losing herself so completely that she didn't remember the experience. Could she have erred? Gotten her signals crossed? *Trust in the one you trust least.* From the mouth of an oracle. And the one I trusted least was Arnaud. Zero doubt.

But that's not what Lady Bastet had said, I realized. Not exactly.

In my memory, I watched her violet lips shape the message. *Trust in the one your* heart *trusts least.*

Yes, that's what she'd said. *Heart.* And that one word changed everything. The divination no longer fit Arnaud Thorne, but it conformed perfectly to my feelings for Caroline Reid. *Caroline* was the

one I was supposed to have trusted—the one who had been offering to help me the whole time.

I kicked the floor in disgust.

Tabitha had been right. I'd let my wounded heart play foil. I was so hell bent on punishing Caroline for choosing Angelus and the fae over me, that I slammed the door on her offer, on her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The words weren't just meant for Caroline, who had *always* helped me—how could I have forgotten that? The apology was also for my mother, who had sacrificed her life for my future. It was for my grandfather, who had protected me in ways I still couldn't quite understand. My self-disgust took on the ponderous weight of disappointment.

I had failed them. And in doing so, I'd unleashed a frigging shadow fiend.

I'd also lost any chance at retribution against my mother's killer, the head of a group that could still be plotting against the Order.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, the darkness swallowing my voice.

I sighed and touched the coin dangling from my neck. Whatever warmth I'd imagined emanating from the metal earlier was gone. I began to tuck it back inside my shirt—and froze.

Ed.

A strangled laugh escaped my throat.

Ed! My golem! The one I'd animated to follow Hoffman. He could still be out there, the amulet that powered him dangling from his clay neck. When did Hoffman say he'd seen him? A week ago?

I stood and paced in a circle, not wanting to get too excited, but not wanting to release the slender hope, either. As my golem, Ed would be accessible to me. That didn't require magic, just focus.

A kaleidoscope of colors danced before my eyes as I sat in my centering pose. It was a long shot—I hadn't expected Ed to hold out for more than a few days. But hadn't a rover or two tooled over the Mars surface years beyond their life expectancies? I was mixing robotics and magic in my thinking, sure, but still … I needed Ed to have that same plucky resilience.

I took a calming breath, closed my eyes, and focused on my creation.

A moment later, the world lurched into motion.

"…MATTER of finding the right *enterprise*, you see what I'm sayin'?"

Like coming to the end of a merry-go-round ride, the up-down, round-and-round motion slowed, then stopped. From what felt like the

inside of a full-body cast, I peered out at a room of muddy shapes.

I—I'm out of the vault. It worked!

"And man, don't listen to what they're sayin' on the streets," the sleepy voice beside me continued. "Shit. There's money to be made if you got the right enterprise. Then all you need is *capital*."

My, or rather Ed's, legs were stretched out in front of me. I recognized the pants I'd given him, though they were caked with filth now. His shoes had either come off or been stolen. Two sets of gray, blocky toes stared back at me. Beyond his feet, the rest of the room came into dull focus. I was in a bedroom layered with mattresses and languid bodies. The bodies sprawled across one another, smoke drifting from their sallow fingers and lips.

Somehow Ed had landed in a flophouse.

Newspapers slid off me as I tested my right arm, then my left. The movements were stiff and clunky. I pawed my chest for the amulet. Still under the shirt, though the power that sustained Ed's life was ebbing.

When I tried to stand, an arm around my neck restrained me.

"Hold on a sec, man," the sleepy voice said. "You need *capital*, which means you got to look for *investors*. But it's better to secure a loan, see? Then you don't got to share ownership. Problem is, my credit's shot to shit. Rap sheet don't help none, either. That's where I could use you."

The man leaning into me was gaunt, his eyebrows and mustache threadbare scratches on the skeletal contours of his face. With his free hand, he combed back a pile of brittle-looking hair. He blinked a few times, his hooded eyes like muscadine grapes in the deep pits of his sockets.

I tried to tell him to let go, that I needed to take off, but all that emerged were lumpy mumbles.

The man's mouth stretched into a grin. "Yeah, man, you see where I'm goin' with this. Fifty-fifty split. Even Steven. You secure the loans, I manage the enterprise." He cinched me closer, until the bill of my Mets cap was indenting his brow. "Look man, I don't say this to just anyone, but you got that look about you. I trust you. And I'll tell you right now, I'm an honest Joe. I don't lie, cheat, steal. None of that. Not anymore. That shit's all behind me, sure as I'm sitting here."

I could have pointed out that he was sitting on a filthy mattress in a drug den, but the clock was ticking. I peeled his clammy arm from around my neck and struggled to my feet.

Have to figure out where I am.

"Hey, man, where you going?"

Unaccustomed to piloting Ed's body, I stumbled over an array of junkies in front of a window and parted the blinds' plastic slats. The

view was of a fenced back lot and a crumbling field of buildings. I wasn't one hundred percent, but it looked like the Lower East Side.

The man behind me tried to stand. "I haven't told you my idea for our enterprise."

I emerged into a living room that featured a pair of old couches and another sprawl of bodies.

"Soft pretzels, man," he called from the back room.

I searched the living room for a phone, but if there were any around, they were buried.

Staggering through a stench of urine and sweat, I made my way to the front door and into a hallway. From there, I found a stairwell. I fell several times on my journey to the lobby. Ed had no sensation in his extremities and zero peripheral vision. It was a wonder he had managed at all these last days.

By the time I reached the street, I was moving more like a man buzzed than blottoed. The street sign on the corner told me I was in the Bowery.

Need to find a working phone.

I lumbered south to Canal Street, aware that the fiend could return to the vault at any moment. I was on borrowed time, and little more. A payphone leaned at the corner. When I rounded it, though, I discovered that the receiver had been torn out. Wires sprayed from the bottom of the dented box.

"Shit," I managed to grunt.

"Hey, there you are!"

I turned to find the man with the soft pretzel plan hustling to catch up to me, his peeling loafers slapping the sidewalk as he lurched this way and that. He came to a wheezing stop in front of me, a filthy floral shirt hanging from the thin rack of his shoulders. "Why'd you bail, man?"

Because I need to make a goddamned phone call, I tried to say. But with the amulet's power ebbing, the only intelligible words that emerged from Ed's mouth were "need" and "phone."

"The hell didn't you say so?" Pretzel reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a flip phone, and pried it open. "Got it from my sister." He squinted over the display as he coughed into his fist. "One bar of battery left, man."

I nodded and gave his shoulder an enthusiastic pat that almost knocked him to the ground. *God bless this man.* He handed over the phone, but my fingers were too fat to punch in the numbers. On my second try, I nearly dropped the phone. My clay face creased with stress.

I don't have time for this.

"Here, man, give me the digits." Pretzel took his sister's phone

back.

With monumental concentration, I articulated each number. Pretzel entered them, then held the phone up to my ear. I felt the blood I'd used in creating Ed pumping through me. The call hadn't gone straight to voicemail. For the first time in months, Caroline's line was ringing.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Carllln," I said, feeling like I was speaking through a mouthful of M&Ms.

"Who is this?"

"Eh-eh-sn."

"I can't understand you."

In the background I heard heated conversation. The mayor's distinct voice rose above the others—the sound of it, anyway. I couldn't make out any words, but it told me Caroline was at City Hall. I tried to repeat my name, but the more I forced it, the more jumbled it came out.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm ending the call."

"Whu-ait!" My mind scrambled for some way I could get her to understand me.

"Look, sir. I don't recognize your number, and I'm in the middle of something."

"Sub!" I blurted out. The old joke between us for all the times she used to cover my classes.

A silence followed. "Everson?"

"Y-ysh!" If Ed had tear ducts, I'm pretty sure they would have wept with joy.

The voices around her diminished as though she were walking into another room. "Thank God," she breathed. "What's wrong? Where are you?"

Okay, she knew it was me, but how was I going to get her to understand a single thing I said. The situation was too complex to grunt out in monosyllables over a phone. If I was going to warn her, I needed a face-to-face.

"M-meet," I managed.

"You want to meet? Where?" No hesitation.

I thought for a moment. The streets around City Hall were probably closed. The checkpoints would be a nightmare. I came up with a place about halfway between us and within walking distance.

"Clum-ba Pa," I said.

"I didn't get that, Everson."

I balled up my fists and tried again. "Clum-ba-ba Pa."

Pretzel pulled the phone from my ear. "I think he's trying to say Columbus Park, lady."

I nodded fervently.

“He’s saying yes,” Pretzel said. He stuck the phone back against my ear and bounced his eyebrows. “She sounds fiiine.”

“Columbus Park,” Caroline repeated. “All right. I’m heading there now. I’ll meet you at the pavilion.” She ended the call before I could attempt to thank her. Probably just as well.

Wavering on his feet, Pretzel slid me a wasted grin.

“Need a wingman?” he asked.

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Our staggering journey took us down Chinatown's narrow streets. The amulet's energy flagged and surged like a dying electrical appliance, and I had to lean on Pretzel for support several times. Thankfully, the sidewalks were empty, the shops closed—the thundering concussions from the battle that afternoon likely having driven everyone inside.

Almost everyone.

At the next intersection, a gang of young men in white suits appeared. I recognized them as White Hand enforcers, employees of Bashi. They patrolled the street in a V formation.

Crap.

I searched around for a place to hide. The gang spotted us and veered our way.

Double crap.

I didn't have time to be interrogated. The amulet fueling me was already in the red, and if the White Hand decided to remove it, Ed would collapse into a mound of clay, and I'd land back in the vault. I lowered my head, hoping the gang would allow a pair of common vagrants to shuffle past. But Pretzel chose that moment to pick up his business pitch.

"The thing with soft pretzels, man, is they don't discriminate. They're for everyone, you know? Race, age, creed—none of that shit matters. Come one, come all. The only thing might change is what's put on 'em. Some like mustard, others like that horseradish."

The members of the White Hand surrounded us.

"Oh, hey," my partner said. "What do you guys like on your pretzels? Sweet and sour sauce?"

Oh, Christ.

The man in the lead position stared down at him. "What are you doing here?"

"We're goin' on a date," Pretzel answered proudly.

"With each other?"

The other gang members laughed. Not realizing we were the butt of the joke, Pretzel laughed along with them. The leader's mouth didn't budge. He had the deadened eyes of a killer. They cut over to

me. “What’s the matter with your boyfriend?” he asked Pretzel. “Someone shoot off his tongue?”

“Aw, he don’t say much,” Pretzel explained. “But when he does, pure genius, man.”

“Is that right?” The leader drew a black Beretta from his waist band. “Let’s hear some of that genius, *tùzi*.”

I looked past him. The park was only a block and a half away.

“Hey,” he snapped. “I’m talking to you.” He flipped my bill and the Mets cap tumbled off my head.

When the leader drew back, I raised an arm in anticipation of being pistol whipped, but his eyes were large and startled. Amid muttered swears, the others in the gang eased back too. The leader recomposed himself, his eyes going dead again. “Get out of our neighborhood,” he said to Pretzel. “I never want to see that deformed piece of shit around here again.”

Pretzel gave his lazy smile. “Yeah, man, he’s cool.”

I retrieved my hat as the gang moved on, their members peering back with unsettled looks. I leaned toward my reflection in a car window and understood. Out in the summer heat, and with the amulet flagging, Ed’s face had started to melt. One eye was a good two inches below the other, and what remained of his nose had skewed to the left of his lips. It was a disturbing sight. With a stab of self-consciousness, I replaced the hat and pulled the bill as low as it would go.

Caroline was already at the pavilion when Pretzel and I shambled up. She must have sensed my presence in the pile of clay, because she hurried toward us. “Everson?” she asked.

I nodded and gestured to my body. *Just a loaner,* I tried to say, but it came out a clumpy moan. Speech gone. Power spent. The park around us was beginning to feel insubstantial too, like a fading dream. For a moment, I felt the cold floor of the vault beneath me.

No…

Pretzel stumbled in front of Caroline. “I spoke to you on the phone, lady. I’m his business partner.”

His voice brought me snapping back. As Caroline accepted Pretzel’s hand, I pawed at my chest. Her head tilted in momentary question before nodding. She could see the energy that emanated from the amulet to power my form, could sense its weakening field.

Pulling her hand from Pretzel’s, she stepped in close and pressed her palm to the amulet. Maybe it was seeing Caroline through Ed’s eyes, but she looked even less human now, more fae. From the amulet, a scent of honeydew rose and a soft, prickling wave swept over my skin. My body began to straighten and tighten, facial features migrating back into place. As the recharge finished, I decided that, yes, Caroline was definitely more fae.

She stepped back, eyes dark with concern.

"Thank you," I said, the words wooden but much easier to form.

"What's going on?" she asked.

I looked over at Pretzel, who was staring up at Caroline with a dreamy expression. "Hey, mind giving us a minute?" I said.

"Oh, yeah, sure." Pretzel staggered off several paces before turning. "Ask if she's got a friend," he called back in a loud whisper. He found a park bench and collapsed onto his back.

I looked at Caroline again. "I'm at Arnaud's."

"I know. We've been trying to get you out of there."

"The situation's become more complicated," I said with a wince. "Arnaud … bit me."

Caroline's face paled. "Bit you?"

"He took over my mind and forced me to call up a shadow fiend. I couldn't stop him. I'm pretty sure he intends to turn the fiend loose on the city after it takes care of the trolls. And me."

Caroline searched my eyes, appearing to weigh the information.

"I'm not asking you to help me," I said. "I've blown my chances, and it's too dangerous anyway. But I can tell you something Arnaud never intended for anyone to find out. He bound the shadow fiend to himself in a way that makes it dependent on his life force. This guarantees the fiend will remain loyal to Arnaud, but it's also an Achilles heel."

"Kill Arnaud, and the fiend perishes," Caroline said.

"Exactly. Meaning there can't be any more negotiations with the vampires. Arnaud has to be destroyed."

Caroline nodded. "We'll take your heed."

"Good," I said, noting how she was even starting to talk like a fae. "And, look, whatever happens … I want you to know I'm sorry. I should have listened to you."

"It's not your fault. I gave you ample reason to distrust me." Caroline smiled tightly. "The fae and their secrecy … I wasn't to discuss my involvement in the mayor's programs with anyone else. Nor was I to intervene directly in the outcomes of those programs."

"You saw the potential for complications, though," I said.

She nodded. "Including the vampires trying to twist the eradication program to their own ends. That story about you … I knew where it originated. But Captain Cole reacted first, preempting the mayor. He organized the hunt for you and lay siege to the Financial District. City Hall had to play catch up."

The war has begun, I remembered Arnaud telling me as his building shook.

"Arnaud fired the first shot, didn't he?" I said, coming to yet another realization of how thoroughly I'd been duped. She nodded.

“So Budge’s offer to end the siege in exchange for my extradition…?”

“Was to get you to safety,” Caroline affirmed. “We were in the process of clearing your name.”

“And the trolls?”

“Sent to help you.”

I shook my head in anguish. Who knew how many would die before the shadow fiend—and Arnaud—could be stopped. *If* they could be stopped. And all because I’d wanted to prove Caroline wrong.

She cupped my chin and raised it until our eyes aligned. “When we spoke in your classroom a few weeks ago, I told you I had worked out an exception in your case. I was given three chances to intervene on your behalf. The first was convincing Budge to negotiate for your release, the second was deploying the trolls. Everson, I still have one more chance to help you. If you’ll let me.”

“At what cost to you?”

The skin between her brows dimpled.

“Oh, c’mon,” I said, “I know the fae well enough to know there are no freebies. I mean, you gave up your mortality to help your father. What did you have to give up to help me?”

She hesitated. “My feelings for you.”

That was why she’d kept her distance. She had known this moment was coming.

“And with this third chance, the deal’s sealed?” I asked. “The feelings go away?”

The moisture in her eyes answered the question for her. I looked over her face, trying to frame it in my memory: every perfect line, every sensual color, from the blush of her lips to the blue-green spires of her irises.

Over on the bench, Pretzel began to croon about faded love.

No kidding, I thought. *Caroline will never look at me this way again.*

I drew a deep breath and, nodding, took her hand.

“Let’s make it a good one, then,” I said.

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I stood slowly, feeling my way up the vault door.

The merry-go-round motion had stopped moments before, and I'd opened my eyes. Gone was the hazy light of the park, Pretzel's singing, Caroline's tender touch, the clean scent of fae magic. There was only a soulless darkness that smelled of sulfur and rancid blood.

But I was still alive.

I pressed my ear to the door's cold metal. I couldn't hear anything. Had the troll massacre ended? Where had Arnaud and the shadow fiend gone? Not out into the city, I hoped.

Okay, need to focus. Need to—

"You're up, I see," Arnaud said.

Blood roared in my ears as I spun toward his voice. No, it was too damned soon!

From the far end of the vault, footsteps clicked toward me. "You were lying so still, I feared you'd succumbed to the transformation. Not everyone has the constitution for it, I'm afraid. I would wager that for every young man I enslave, three to four die. A horrible inefficiency—a nuisance, really. Especially when one is trying his best to play down his true nature."

I pressed myself flat against the vault door, and edged away from his voice, from the soul-raking presence of the shadow fiend.

"But at last the days of hiding are behind us, Mr. Croft. The trick was making the cost of persecution too high. Today, the city received a taste. Tonight, we will give them so much more." Arnaud's eyes shone red in the darkness. Several feet above him, a larger pair of eyes peered hungrily down.

"You promised the battle would be defensive," I stammered.

Arnaud chuckled. "Well, you know what they say. The best defense is a good offense."

"You lied to me."

"Yes, about that…" He and the shadow fiend continued to stalk me in the dark. "I take my pledges very seriously. I have a reputation for my word being as reliable as gold. It's what elevated me to the heights of lower Manhattan while lesser of my kind ended up in the filth of Forty-second Street. The late Sonny Shoat, for example. But in your

case, Mr. Croft, I made an exception to my own rule. And you have your grandfather to blame."

"My grandfather? What in the hell does he have to do with this?"

I could feel the talons of Arnaud's mind probing my thoughts. What he found was terror and uncertainty.

"You know about the original Pact, of course," Arnaud said. "The union between wizards and vampires to resist the enforcers of the Inquisition. Why, you used the Pact's binding power against me in our first meeting. That never should have happened. Your dear grandfather violated the Pact when he double-crossed not only me, but his fellow wizards."

Anger flared hot in my cheeks. "Bullshit."

"Oh, I don't blame you for not knowing, Mr. Croft. He hid the deception very well. Indeed, even I wasn't aware of what he'd done until after his death. But I received a visit one day from someone in your *Order*. A representative, I suppose. The fellow asked some interesting questions, and though he disguised his mission well, I soon understood what he was after. You see, during the campaign in Eastern Europe, some powerful artifacts were stolen, including the Scaig Box over there. I, along with others, had always assumed the Church to have taken and destroyed them. But by the nature of the fellow's questions, it became clear he suspected a vampire of the thefts —me, in particular, given my movements during the war. I must have said enough to convince him otherwise, because he left, and I never saw or heard from him again. It got me thinking back, though. Your grandfather, the Grand Mage himself, had been with me or close by during much of the war. He was at the same places the fellow from the Order had mentioned during our interview."

I continued to ease along the wall of the vault as he talked, chanting quietly.

"Fortunately, I kept close tabs on your grandfather since his arrival in Manhattan. He was behaving quite curiously, performing work far beneath his station. A stage magician and insurance man? I was convinced the war had addled his mind. Some form of shell shock. But after the fellow's visit, I began to wonder whether your grandfather had been hiding something."

Though I kept up the chant, I couldn't help but think about Grandpa's strange habits, his odd hours.

"Every so often he would take a trip out to Port Gurney. If you haven't been, it's a waterfront town, very working class. Old dockyards, warehouses, a few bars as well. Your grandfather would go directly to one bar in particular—a place called the Rhein House—and sit on the same stool, sometimes for hours. He would then emerge, perfectly sober, and drive home, scarcely having spoken. Maybe the

man just liked to spend time in a place suggestive of his German past. Or maybe, I thought, there was more going on than met the eye. Late one night, following the fellow's visit, I dispatched a pair of slaves to that waterfront bar to have a look around. And do you know what they discovered?"

"What?"

"A vault in the bar's basement. Despite considerable coercion, the owner seemed not to know how to open it, claiming the vault was closed and locked when he bought the establishment. After a bit of research, I discovered a strange clause in the property deed. The vault could not be considered a part of any subsequent sale. Very curious, wouldn't you agree?"

"What's your point?"

"When we finally managed to open the vault, we found the Scaig Box alongside a host of artifacts. Ones belonging to both vampires and wizards. It appears your grandfather used the Pact to steal them. I care not for the wizards' grievances—that is for them to sort out. But he stole from *me*. Did you know the earliest vampires were shadow fiends? Only a precious handful remain, and your grandfather took one for himself, the thief."

From the darkness above, the shadow fiend smacked its lips.

"So yes, Mr. Croft," Arnaud said, swooping in close, "my *point* is that your grandfather violated the Pact first, effectively dissolving it."

I kept moving, trying not to allow Arnaud's words to challenge my concentration. But the things he was saying … The vampire had no reason to deceive me now, unless it was to incite confusion and dismay, to fill the vault with more of my stress hormones. But I had *felt* Grandpa's magic on the Scaig Box. And if Grandpa was as powerful as he seemed, he could easily have cast a projection spell to make it seem as though he were at the bar, drinking for hours, while, in fact, he was down inside the vault, checking on the artifacts.

But why?

"I'm not my grandfather," I said defiantly.

"Of course not, Mr. Croft," Arnaud agreed. "If you were even a tenth of the man, you would not be in this precarious position. But that's neither here nor there. The penalty for violating the Pact is death, and since your grandfather is no longer among us, that penalty defaults to his descendants. Or descend*ant* in this case. Be grateful you didn't sire children."

I was at the back of the vault now, moving past the altar.

Almost ready…

"One final thing," Arnaud said, his voice tightening. "You called me a liar, but remember this. Every mistruth, every furtive act, was in accordance with seeing justice through."

“How noble,” I scoffed. “You just left out the part about using me to take over the city.”

“I merely saw an opportunity. And opportunities are my livelihood.”

I nodded to myself. Everything was in place.

“Cerrare,” I called.

Across the vault, the door rang with the power of the Word. The glow it cast outlined Arnaud and the fiend in a wavering blue light. Arnaud snapped his head toward the door and back to me. His blood-masked face remained placid, but I sensed surprise beyond his eyes.

“Perhaps you’re more resourceful than I’ve given you credit for.” His voice, though cutting, was slightly off. “You’ve tapped into some reserve of power, I see. But why seal yourself inside?”

I felt his talons plunge deeper into my thoughts. Or rather, what he believed to be my thoughts. In addition to restoring my magic, Caroline had cast a mental glamour: a *mirage* of my thoughts—in this case random jags of confusion and terror where none existed.

“The locking spell?” I replied evenly. “Oh, that’s to keep anyone from coming to help you.”

He stopped digging, eyes narrowing in on mine.

I grinned and shouted, *“Balaur!”*

Blue light crackled around the coin pendant over my chest and shot a bright beam at Arnaud. The power of the Pact was not only present in the pendant, but just as potent. With an ear-splitting scream, the fiend sliced in front of Arnaud, absorbing the beam into the shadow of its body. The fiend staggered to the floor, smoke rising from its twisting wings.

“That bit about not giving you enough credit…” Arnaud said from behind me.

I wheeled, but he had already pulled the necklace over my head.

“…I take it back.”

I lunged for the coin pendant. Arnaud smashed me in the jaw with a backhand. The vault whorled and dove as the sting of copper filled my mouth.

“Were you *really* trying to bait me into that clumsy trap?” he asked. “I don’t know whether to feel flattered or insulted.”

Another fist smashed me in the right temple, dropping me to my knees.

I pawed toward Arnaud, but the recovered fiend grasped me from behind. Though a shadow, the fiend was far from immaterial. The talons of one hand gripped my gut while the other hand clamped my mouth so I couldn’t cast. As its foul, bristling wings wrapped me around, I felt the jagged fangs of its underbite nestle into the shelf at the base of my skull.

“A moment,” Arnaud said, pacing to the center of the vault where he could face me.

I stared back at him, eyes pleading.

“I was prepared to make your death quick, Mr. Croft. A reward for your service, naively given, though it was.” He twirled the necklace around a finger. “But since you insist on being a petulant little bastard, I am going to allow the fiend to savor you while I watch. Perhaps it will help resolve some of the anger I’ve accrued toward your grandfather these past years.”

He wasn’t a thief, I thought so Arnaud could hear.

“No?” he answered. “The evidence suggests otherwise.”

The fiend ran its sharp tongue against the back of my head, leaving a burning trail of saliva. I grunted in pain but held still for fear that the slightest stimulus would send the fangs into my skull.

You don’t know what my grandfather’s intentions were, I thought. *No one does.*

“And never will, Mr. Croft. This closes the case as far as I’m concerned.” Arnaud raised his eyes to the fiend.

He helped you, goddammit!

“And deceived me. I do not suffer betrayal lightly.”

He gave the necklace another twirl and caught the coin pendant in his hand. As he stroked the symbol with a finger, I remembered the night Grandpa had appeared the necklace from his sleeve.

The necklace is an heirloom, he’d said. *It is meant to protect.*

Thank you, I’d replied. *But protect against what?*

Instead of answering, Grandpa had taken the necklace by the chain and placed it around my neck, the heavy coin settling over my sternum, where I could feel its deep, tidal energy.

Wear it in the city, he’d said, *under your shirt.*

“Oh, does this have sentimental value for you, Mr. Croft?” Arnaud asked in a teasing voice.

I raised my eyes to his. *You don’t deserve to be in the same room with it, much less touching it.*

The vampire cocked an eyebrow and placed the necklace around his armored neck. “I don’t know, Mr. Croft. I think it rather suits me.” He turned from side to side, the coin sliding over metal plating. “Perhaps it will become *my* sentimental piece, something to remember the end of the Croft line.”

He watched my eyes for my reaction.

I’d been keeping a silent countdown in my head. Things had moved more quickly than I’d planned, but through a series of challenges and subtle suggestions, I’d gotten Arnaud to don the necklace. Underneath the shadow fiend’s hand, my mashed lips twisted into a smile.

Checkmate, you arrogant son of a bitch.

Arnaud's mouth straightened. "How dare you—"

The shield I'd built around the coin fractured. Amassed energy detonated in a nova of blinding white light, swallowing Arnaud. The explosion cannoned the fiend and me backwards. As we smashed through the wooden altar, I felt the fiend's fangs clench, only to break into smoke.

Where Arnaud had been stood an afterimage, a formidable vampire one moment, a decimation of atoms the next. Blown apart by the power of the Pact. The vampire's scream rang around the vault for several seconds, a shrill, fading echo. Beneath the pain, I heard raw rage. The wrath of a creature who had won centuries' worth of battles only to lose the final war—and in the time it took to understand he'd been outwitted by a mortal.

Pushing myself to my feet, I coughed out a weak laugh. "Not bad for a petulant little bastard."

In the center of the vault, Grandpa's coin pendant rattled to a rest.

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"So let's see if we can break this down for everyone," Courtney said. "You were acting as a double *double* agent?"

"Well, it's sort of complicated," I stammered.

I had sworn off press conferences, but Mayor Lowder argued this wouldn't be a press conference, but a relaxed interview. "You want your life back, don't you?" he'd asked. He had me there. After the NYPD had extracted me from the ruins of downtown, I had spent the next two weeks in hiding until City Hall could leak the "actual" account of my involvement. "Anyway," Budge said, "I gave Courtney over at TV 20 first rights to your story." I wondered if that had anything to do with Budge being a bachelor again and Courtney being gorgeous.

"'Complicated' is an understatement," the blond anchor said with a small laugh. "You had *everyone* fooled."

A tide of assenting murmurs went up. I glanced around. While the interview was relaxed in the sense I was wearing jeans, Budge failed to mention it would be held in front of a packed auditorium at City Hall.

I swallowed. "Yeah, I guess so."

"The simple answer is this," Budge cut in. "I knew the vampires were planning something, but I didn't know what. So I had Everson here infiltrate their ranks. And when the vampires attacked, guess who was on the inside?" Budge slapped my knee. "My good old secret weapon."

"Five vampires destroyed, including Arnaud Thorne," Courtney cited. "Two captured…"

Leaderless, and their blood slaves decimated, two of the remaining vampires had fled while two others surrendered to the NYPD. At my suggestion, the vampires were bolted inside steel coffins and their slaves imprisoned in a reinforced shipping container until the city could figure out what to do with them. A short ethics debate followed. In the end, the vampires were executed by cremation in order to restore their blood slaves to mortality. Those young enough to survive the transformation went into immediate counseling.

"All thanks to Everson's fine job," Budge said.

“So, the Central Park campaign…?” Courtney asked.

“Mistakes were made,” Budge cut in, “but the buck stops with me and no one else. Especially not Everson here, who risked his life trying to get the other officers out of the park that night.”

Courtney smiled and tilted her head in approval.

“And we learned from that experience,” Budge went on. “The fight was better waged from the air, which is what we did. The city’s had to deal with a lot of smoke these past several days—and I do apologize for that—but Central Park is officially clear now. The monsters that once terrorized the woods and meadows are now the ashes from which a new, improved park will rise.”

“And to that end, I understand you’ll be announcing a jobs program soon?”

Budge’s embarrassed laugh sounded like part of a script he and Courtney had worked out beforehand. “You’re preempting me a little here, but yeah. With Central Park and the downtown in need of rebuilding, we’re allotting a portion of the federal package to put New Yorkers back to work. There are going to be a ton of new jobs.” He turned toward the crowd. “That is, if you would do me the honor this fall of allowing me to serve a second term.”

“That seems in little doubt now,” Courtney said above the whoops and applause.

Budge waved his hand modestly, but Courtney was right. The death of Budge’s wife coupled with his victory over the vampires had vaulted him to a twelve-point lead in the latest poll. The jobs program would only build on that. I had to hand it to him and Caroline. They had conducted a near-flawless campaign, he for the mayorship, she for the fae portal.

Courtney returned to me. “And will you have a role in the second administration?”

“I’m planning a little time off, actually,” I said. “There are some things I need to take care of.”

“I hear you’ll have a new title at Midtown College when you return.”

“That’s true.” I couldn’t help but smile. “Tenured professor. I received the news this week.”

“Well, congratulations,” Courtney said as more applause rose up.

I nodded and gave the same modest wave as the mayor. I wasn’t there when Chairman Cowper announced my tenure to the rest of the faculty, but I was told Professor Snodgrass went into a convulsion that locked his entire body. He was carried out on a stretcher, one of his heeled shoes protruding from his mouth to prevent him from biting through his tongue.

I had his secretary retrieve my cane from his office.

“And the honorariums don’t end there,” Courtney said with a sly smile. “Mayor?”

I turned toward Budge with more than a stab of dread. *Okay, what’s going on?*

“As mayor of New York,” he proclaimed reaching inside his jacket and withdrawing an oblong black case, “I hereby present Everson Croft with our city’s highest honor.” When he opened the case, a ceremonial key to the city glittered for everyone to see. “May you remain a trusted friend.”

A fresh storm of applause rolled in as cameras flashed and audience members stood from their seats. Budge signaled for me to stand as well. He seized my right hand and held the open case between us.

“You’re one lucky bastard,” he said through his enormous smile. “City was ready to rip you to shreds. Press had practically written your obituary.”

“No shit,” I replied through my own fixed smile. “Thanks for bringing me back to life.”

“Thank Caroline. Hell of a body count you left down there.”

“Wasn’t all me,” I said. “But I am sorry about the wolves.”

“Ehh, I never much cared for them. Wife excluded, of course.”

“About that…” I started to say, but he gave my hand a harder squeeze.

Following the photo op, the interview turned into a campaign platform for Budge, which was fine by me. Among other things, he announced a wave of hirings in government security—the werewolves’ former domain—trimming New York’s unemployment rate by a half point. I sat back and studied the key, wondering how long the good will would last. New York had a short attention span and an even shorter memory.

When the interview concluded, Courtney, Budge, and I stood and shook hands. While the audience filed out and the camera crew packed it in, Budge pulled me aside.

“Listen,” he said in a lowered voice, “you don’t need to apologize about my wife. I was there last spring. I saw what happened. Heat of battle, and all that.” He snuffed out a laugh. “She was a helluva fighter, though, huh? I wanted her to pull through, I did, but … The damned thing of it is, if she’d lived to know you finished off Arnaud, she’d have forgiven you everything.”

“Really?”

“Hey, I know my Penny.” He smiled sadly before changing the subject. “Do you know how long you’re gonna be away?”

“I don’t,” I said, thinking about the Order, blood magic, my mother…

"Well, be sure to check in when you get back. I could use you around here for my second term."

As he gave my hand a final solid shake, it struck me that from our meeting in the warehouse until now, a few attempts at coercion aside, Budge had shot pretty straight with me.

"Will do," I said.

I watched him walk to the wing of the stage, where Angelus and Caroline were waiting for him. Caroline glanced past his shoulder. When our gazes met, her face showed recognition but nothing deeper. Per her arrangement, her feelings for me had vanished. Poof.

I raised a hand anyway. She responded with a nod before turning and disappearing with her husband and the mayor.

I stared after her for several seconds.

You didn't have a choice, I reminded myself. *Neither of you did.*

And the truth was she was becoming more and more fae by the day. Her sacrifice to help me had only sped her departure from my world. I thought about our final moments in Columbus Park, her awesome power riffling through the conduit that connected Ed back to me, restoring my mind, my magic. I would have had to let her go eventually. The knowledge didn't make it hurt any less, though. I blinked and rubbed the heels of my palms across my eyes.

"There he is."

I gave myself another moment before turning. I spotted Vega limping up the steps to the stage, her son clinging to her trailing hand. She flashed a smile when she saw me walking over.

"Somebody's been dying to meet you," she said to me.

When my brow wrinkled in question she cocked her head down at her son.

"Oh, yeah?" I lowered myself to a knee and extended a hand. "Tony, right?"

The one time I'd seen him had been after Arnaud's slaves had returned him to Vega. He'd probably been too shocked to remember me then, and I was frankly surprised Vega was introducing him to me now. I guess blowing up the vampire responsible for his kidnapping had boosted my stock in Vega's portfolio. I smiled when the six-year-old boy edged further behind her braced leg.

"Go on," Vega said to him. "Shake the man's hand."

Eyes fixed on Grandpa's ring, which I'd recovered from a vault in Arnaud's office, Tony stretched an arm forward and clasped my fingers.

"He's been talking about you ever since the story broke," Vega said. "Thinks you're a superhero."

I shook his warm hand and stood again. "What, and you don't?"

"Well, you've got more lives than anyone I've ever met. I'll give

you that."

"You're partly to blame this time," I pointed out.

"And you managed to make me not regret it."

We both smiled and looked over at Tony, who had picked up my cane from the chair I'd been sitting in for the interview.

"It's all right," I said before she could tell her son to leave it alone. "It's safe. He won't be able to open it." For several seconds, we watched him cane-fight an imaginary foe.

"So what's this about you taking time off?" she asked.

I reflected on the past several weeks. In one form or another, I'd been involved with clearing the ghouls from the subway lines, the goblins from Central Park, not to mention decimating the city's werewolf and vampire populations. And that was on top of learning about the dark mage. "I haven't earned it?" I teased Vega. "Nah, it's just some personal time."

Her eyes narrowed. "Anything to do with Lady Bastet's murder?"

Crap. We'd never buried that hatchet. "A lot, actually," I admitted. "I think the person who killed her also killed my mother."

"You never told me your mother was murdered."

"I didn't know until that night you caught me at LB's. I saw something in her scrying globe."

"Do you have a name for me?"

"Not yet." I checked my watch. "And I've gotta run."

"We're not gonna play this game again, are we?" she asked.

She was right. I owed her more. "I'll tell you anything I find out. *If*," I added, "you let me call the shots." *And if*, I thought, *I'm not in terminal trouble with the Order*. "This is a whole different level of menace."

Vega's lips torqued as she considered my terms.

A small hand tugged at my pant leg. I looked down to find Tony holding my cane up for me.

"Here, Mr. Croft," he said, his brown eyes as intense as his mother's. "To fight the monsters."

"Thanks, big man." I smiled at Vega. "He'd make a great sidekick."

She ruffled his feathery curls. "Yeah, when he's not too busy making trouble."

"Hey, listen," I said. "I'm glad we're talking again."

When she replied, it was with an edge of warning. "Let's try to keep it that way."

"I'll be in touch," I assured her.

"I'm counting on it."

I kissed her cheek in farewell—why not?—and gave Tony a high five. Vega seemed not to mind either gesture. As I pattered down the auditorium steps, her son's voice rang out behind me.

“Bye-bye, Mr. Croft!”

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"You're late," Chicory said when I entered my apartment.

"Yeah, sorry about that." I hung my cane on the coat rack and hustled to the sitting area in front of the stone fireplace. "The interview went longer than expected. Can I get you anything?" I ran through a mental inventory of what I had on hand. "Water? Um … cheese?"

"No," he said. "Have a seat."

From the reading chair, my mentor nodded to the couch opposite him. He was buried under Tabitha whose purrs sounded like a small tractor. His eyes glowered at me over her orange mass.

"The Order received your communication."

I'd thought his scheduled visit might have something to do with that. I sat carefully.

"Let me hear it from you," he said.

"Okay." I cleared my throat and started into a verbal account of what I'd sent the week before. Bringing my mother's hair to Lady Bastet, the mystic's murder, the residue found on the slaughtered cats, my attempt to cast through said residue and the resulting encounter with the dark mage, the vision in the scrying globe of my mother's murder … I told him everything. Even the part about the mage stealing my blood. Blood I had given to Lady Bastet willingly.

My only omission was Arnaud's claim that Grandpa had stolen the wizard artifacts.

When I finished, Chicory watched me for several long seconds, fingers digging into the hair on Tabitha's crown. Sweat dewed over my brow. For a moment I was back in Romania awaiting Lazlo's verdict: train me or destroy me. I flinched as the repaired air conditioner huffed on.

"You violated a cardinal tenant of the Order," Chicory said at last. "Several, in fact."

"Several?"

He arched a bushy eyebrow. "Summoning a shadow fiend?"

"Oh, c'mon. You're going to stick *that* on me? I was under a vampire's control. I didn't have a choice. And in case you didn't notice, I took care of the vampire in question. The shadow fiend, too."

“Yet another example of giving your blood willingly,” Chicory said.

“What, you think I offered Arnaud my neck? ‘Here, turn me into one of your mindless undead. Enslave me for all eternity. I’m begging you.’” I sighed at the ridiculousness of it.

“The point, Everson, is that you contravened the rules. Something you’ve done time and again. Your potential for magic is enormous, but so too is your potential for causing great harm. You dabble in things you shouldn’t, despite any and all warnings to the contrary. You’re a danger to yourself, your city, and to the Order of Magi and Magical Beings.”

I could tell by his tone he was building up to a verdict. I made a circular motion with my shaking hand. “Just cut to the chase, please.”

“Everson, this is the part of my job I least enjoy…”

“You’re giving me more preamble,” I said.

Chicory let out a heavy sigh. “The Order is through issuing warnings. The penalty this time is … severe.”

“Death?” The word scratched from my throat.

I remembered the sensation of falling into the In Between, that realm of luminescent darkness and haunting gatekeepers. I hadn’t been ready to pass then, and I wasn’t ready now.

“Possibly,” Chicory answered.

“Possibly?” I stared at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tabitha stirred on his lap and murmured, “Less talking, more scratching.”

“The dark mage’s name is Marlow,” Chicory said. “He was once a member of the Order. A lot like you, in fact. Curious. Headstrong. *Impetuous.* And it was this last quality that got him into trouble. He discovered an old book by Lich, the member of the First Order who aspired to the power of his siblings and opened the seam to the Whisperer. The book contained Lich’s original notes. Notes on his spell experiments as well as pages of invective against the First Order: their iniquities, their disproportionate power. The charges inflamed Marlow’s mind. He formed a splinter group known as the Front to ascend to the power of Lich.”

“Why didn’t the Order stop him?” I asked.

“Marlow kept his activities well cloaked. When the Order began to suspect him, they sent an agent to infiltrate the Front to learn more.”

“My mother,” I said.

Chicory nodded. “It’s why the Order kept no records on her. Rest assured, Everson, I’m told she performed her job very capably. But all it took was one intercepted message, apparently.”

“And they killed her.”

“Marlow sent the Order her ashes in a trash bag.”

My face burned. “So why in the hell wasn’t he punished?”

“Marlow and the Front went into deeper hiding. By that time, they had acquired sufficient power to stay hidden.”

“Even against the Elders?” I asked, incredulous.

“I’m afraid so.”

“I thought you said there had only been one rebellion against the Order.”

“Yes, but a second is coming,” Chicory said. “Of that the Order has little doubt. It just hasn’t started yet.”

“So what does this have to do with my sentence of *possible* death?”

“The Order believes there was a reason Marlow didn’t want you to learn about your mother’s murder.”

“And what was that?”

“He knew you would want to come after him.”

I barked out a laugh. “Why should that bother him? The *Elders* can’t even touch him.”

“This is different, Everson. As a descendant, you would be able to penetrate his veiling and defensive spells in ways others can’t. Perhaps even get close to him unnoticed.”

“Descendant? What in the hell are you talking about?”

“Based on the information you shared,” Chicory said, “the Order believes Marlow is your father.”

For a vertiginous moment, my soul seemed to leave my body. Far away, I felt the ice-cold brush of the AC, heard Tabitha’s chopping purrs. And then I was back, my heart resuming its hard, flip-flopping rhythm.

“How sure are they?” I asked.

“That’s what they want to find out. And that’s where your sentencing comes in. As of now, the Order is suspending your other activities. Your new mandate is to find Marlow and destroy Lich’s book. It’s where he derives his power. If Marlow *is* your father, you should succeed in the first.”

I didn’t like the qualifying *should*. “What about the second?”

Beneath the wiry shelf of his brows, Chicory’s eyes turned dark. “Marlow is also known as the Death Mage. There’s a reason for that.”

I nodded, fully present now. I didn’t care what his name implied. This was bigger than my mother’s murder, bigger than vengeance. I would be picking up where my mother had left off, countering a threat to the Order, to humankind. This was about legacy.

I met Chicory’s waiting gaze.

“When do I begin?”

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Death Mage

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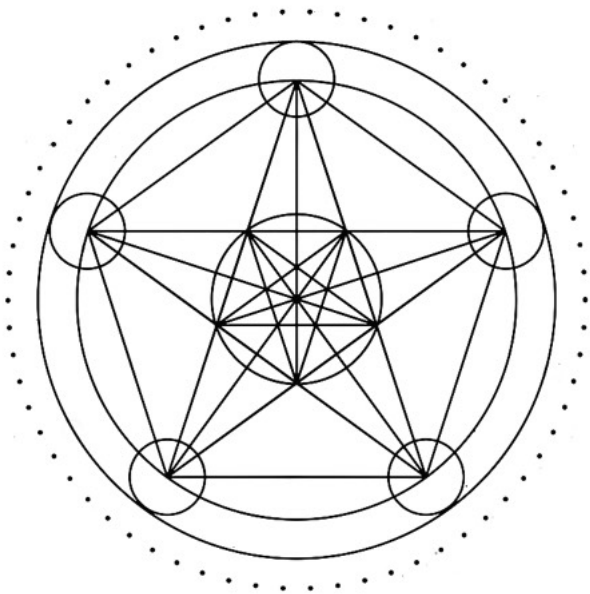
Book 4



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1

I staggered, my breaths coming in ragged gasps. The trees on all sides looked the same, their trunks mottled with black mushrooms. I had been here before. I couldn't remember when, but it was familiar enough that I knew no matter where I ran, I would only end up more lost.

A chill wracked my five-year-old body as I stopped and tilted my head back. The gray sky through the branches was dimming with the coming night. When darkness fell, the creatures would emerge.

Horrid creatures.

I broke into another blind run. "Mom!" I shouted.

I had no memory of my mother. I knew her only as a framed photograph in the living room of Grandpa and Nana's house: a young woman looking out a large window, half her face in light, the other in shadow, one hand resting over the pregnant swell of her stomach. Even so, I sensed in my gut that she was the only one who could help me out of this place.

"Mom!" I called again.

Someone, or something, answered, a whisper that slithered from the trees to my right: *"Everson."*

The alien voice was familiar to me in the same way the forest was. The voice would chase me and eventually catch me. I veered away from it, heart slamming. The voice echoed from all sides now.

"Everson … verson … son."

I pumped my arms and legs as hard as I could. Around me the forest darkened. The mushrooms on the trees clotted into thick, dripping tumors. When I tried to shout for help, the spores that swept through the air closed my throat. Only a gasping whine squeezed out.

"Everson," the voice whispered again, seeming to reach for me. *"Join us."*

I arched my back, breaking through fresh whirlwinds of spores and into a deepening gloom. Wet leaves squished underfoot, and the air stunk of rot. Sinister shadows moved among the trees.

"Everson … verson … son."

"Stay away," I gasped, batting through the crowding branches.

The forest pressed in until I had to slow down to pick my way

through. I climbed between a pair of trees, the toadstools on their trunks bursting like pustules, and became stuck. I grunted and squirmed, but the space between the trees narrowed further, holding me fast.

No! I thought desperately.

But this was what always happened, wasn't it?

"Join us," the voice whispered behind me. *"Join the cluster."*

I peeked back. The forest shimmered in an insane dance of colors. Below, something wet was climbing my legs, but the colors around me, dazzling shades of pink, orange, and emerald, were too intense. I couldn't stop looking at them. In hungry squelches, the wetness inched up my stomach. When it reached my shoulders, I could see it in my peripheral vision: a gelatinous black fungus. I went to wipe it away, but I couldn't move my arms.

"Join the cluster, Everson," the voice whispered. *"Become one."*

The fungus squelched up my neck and spread over my jaw like a beard.

In revulsion, I tore my gaze from the shimmering colors. "Mother!" I shouted.

The word tapped into an undercurrent of power. Crackling energy broke from the sound, radiating out in all directions. The fungus blew from my body. The trees that held me parted.

I stumbled backward and fell into a quiet clearing.

"Everson," someone said—but not the whispering voice this time.

I turned and rose. At the center of the clearing stood my mother. A sob of relief hiccupped from my chest, and I ran toward her. Except for her lean stomach, she looked identical to the woman in the picture: half in shadow, hair brushed over one shoulder. But she wasn't smiling in the same faint way. Not like in the framed photo. Not like in the other…

Dreams, I thought suddenly. *I'm inside a recurring dream.*

I peered around, expecting the dreamscape to dissolve away, but the clearing only became more vivid. A scattering of stately trees creaked and rustled in a light breeze. Birds chirped in their branches. I looked back at my mother, a sea of emotions roiling inside me. I'd never known her, and yet she'd become a powerful force in my imagination.

By the time I arrived in front of her, I was a grown man—which had never happened before. No, the dream-child me would typically hug her leg and tell her I was lost. She would say that she'd found me, that she would always find me. She would then point the way from the forest, but tell me I had to make the journey on my own. She always said this with a smile.

Now, concern lines creased her young face. Before I could ask what

was wrong, she embraced me firmly and stood back.

"Everson, there isn't much time. The Whisperer is coming through."

"The Whisperer," I echoed, remembering what Chicory had told me. An ancient entity older than the First Saints and Demons, the Whisperer had corrupted the youngest of Saint Michael's nine children. It had turned Lich against his siblings. In a one-man rebellion, Lich had nearly overthrown the Order. He was eventually defeated, the fissure to the Whisperer sealed. But centuries later, Marlow, a man the Order believed to be my father, discovered Lich's book. He replicated the spells, reopening the fissure to the ancient being.

"How do we stop it?" I asked.

My mother's eyes hardened as she looked past me. "Run," she said, but not in answer to my question.

I turned and realized we were no longer in a clearing, but a large stone room, the trees becoming pillars. Familiar-looking figures in black robes strode toward us, all chanting a single word.

"Traitor … traitor … traitor."

Backing in front of my mother, I groped for my cane, my amulet, my revolver, but I wasn't carrying any of them. I had witnessed this scene before, in Lady Bastet's scrying globe: the scene of my mother's execution.

"Leave her alone!" I shouted.

My mother spoke near my ear. "Don't let him know about you."

"Who?" I asked.

"Did you really think you could keep up this shameful duplicity without me finding out?" A tall figure emerged through the others, the face beneath his hood an ornate gold mask. The mouth frowned in judgment while the dark, vacant eyeholes seemed to stare through me.

Marlow.

"I did nothing," my mother told him.

Marlow stopped in front of us. "Nothing? You joined the Front as a sworn rebel against tyranny. You pledged your allegiance, your *life*. Only for us to learn that you're a plant for the Order."

"That's a lie," she said.

The mage drew a wand that smelled of elderwood. "Then you shouldn't have a problem submitting to a mind flaying."

"I will submit to nothing," my mother said.

I lunged for Marlow's wand, but my hands passed through it. He seemed not to notice me.

"Then you are admitting guilt," he said.

"If that's what you want to believe," she replied.

"Vigore!" I shouted, thrusting my palms toward him. The energy of

the force blast rippled through the dreamscape. When it subsided, everything wavered still again, and Marlow remained in front of us.

"It's the truth, traitor," he said, raising his wand. "And you know the penalty."

"Do your worst."

"No!" I shouted.

The force from the mage's wand threw my mother against a stone pillar. She grunted in pain. Marlow spoke another Word, and vines writhed up through cracks in the floor, binding my mother to the pillar. An especially thick tendril wrapped her throat, making her gag.

"It didn't have to end this way, Eve," he said before turning to the others. "Behold the penalty for treachery. Death by fire."

Yes, I had witnessed this scene before, from inside my mother's memory. I had felt her fear, her pain. I raced back to her, intent on pulling the vines away. But when I reached for the thick tendril encircling her throat, my hands passed through it, as they'd done with the wand. Sadness filled my mother's eyes as they met mine.

"What can I do?" I pled. "How can I help you?"

A whisper strained from her lips.

"What?" I asked, leaning closer.

I love you, Everson, she mouthed.

"Fuoco!" Marlow shouted behind me.

Flames exploded from the floor, engulfing my mother and throwing me backward. I pulled off my shirt and ran at the fire to beat it out. But the fire became a reflection in a gold mask, and I was standing in front of Marlow, staring up at him, and he was suddenly huge.

Run, my mother had said. *Don't let him know about you.*

The rest of the room darkened as the mage's face canted down. Beyond the eyeholes, a pair of lights burned in recognition. His hand shot out and seized my wrist. A cold, aching power emanated from his grip. I strained against him, but I was a small child again.

"You've come to join us," he whispered.

I shook my head, unable to make a sound.

"To join the cluster." He lifted me from my feet.

When our faces were even, Marlow reached for his mask, which continued to glisten with the fire that consumed my mother. Terror paralyzed me as he began to pull the mask away. I didn't want to see his face … but a part of me had to, had to know if this man was my father.

"To become one," he whispered.

Metal separated from skin in a wet squelching.

"Everson … verson … son."

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2

A pair of ochre-green eyes stared at me through the dark. I snort-gasped and tried to flail back. Tendrils were wrapping my arms, my torso. I heaved with my legs. The top of my head hit something solid.

A snort sounded. “Nice to see you, too.”

“Tabitha?” I shook my arms from the sheets and slid a hand between the headboard and my aching crown. I fought to get my bearings. I’d been in a dream, Marlow about to remove his gold mask. My cat calling my name must have awakened me. I looked around. Except for a crescent moon high in the window, the room was dark. “What time is it?”

Her eyes blinked slowly. “Apparently, time for you to moan in your sleep again.”

I set my legs over the side of the bed and sat up, the horror of the dream still prickling through me. “Sorry about that.”

“I told you to lay off the magic before bed.”

“Oh, should I have eaten my weight in rib eye instead?”

Tabitha narrowed her eyes at me, then thudded down from the end table and sauntered back to her ottoman beneath the window. It wasn’t as comfortable as her divan at home—a fact she reminded me of daily—but we weren’t at home. The week before, Chicory had loaded us into his Volkswagen Rabbit and driven us to a safe house in New Jersey, an unassuming blue affair across the Hudson River. “To train you for your mission,” he’d explained. Though all he’d done so far was fuss inside his lab, shooing me away anytime I asked what he was up to. Even now, I could hear his muttering voice down the hallway.

“I’m not the one having nightmares,” Tabitha said as she arranged herself into a large mound. “The fifth in five nights?”

“Yeah … except this one was different.” I coughed to clear my sleep-clogged throat. “I was lost in a forest again, calling for my mother. She found me, but this time she didn’t have any answers. Couldn’t tell me how to get out. She just told me to run and hide.”

“Run from what?” Tabitha asked.

“From whom,” I said, remembering the way the flames had danced in the gold mask. “The Death Mage.”

“He *is* all you’ve been talking about for the last week. No wonder you’re having nightmares.” She yawned and smacked her lips. “Waking everyone up,” she added in a mutter, eyelids sliding closed.

“Everyone meaning you?” I asked testily. “Look, I don’t know if it’s occurred to you, but I’m shipping out soon, and there’s a chance—hell, maybe a good chance—I won’t be coming back.”

The thought lanced through me. As punishment for willingly giving my blood to Lady Bastet, which was then stolen by Marlow, the Order was mandating that I infiltrate Marlow’s hideout and destroy Lich’s book. It was a daunting mission. Magic-users more powerful than me had tried and failed, my mother among them. Hence Marlow’s title as Death Mage.

“I *will* miss you darling,” Tabitha said sleepily.

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“But you’ll come back.”

I looked at my cat, her words catching me by surprise. As a succubus, Tabitha had no divine powers, but hope flickered inside me anyway. “Oh yeah?” I asked cautiously.

“You always do.”

She had a point. Whether it was facing demon lords or ancient vampires, I had a knack for pulling something out of my hat at the last moment. Part of that went with being a magic-user. We carried a “luck quotient,” as Chicory called it. More accurately, we lived in a symbiotic relationship with magic, a force keen on being moved and manipulated. That relationship often led to sudden insights and synchronicities, especially in times of acute stress.

But this challenge felt different—probably because I would be going up against another wizard, one much more powerful than I was. Not only would his luck quotient cancel mine, it would likely exceed it.

“We’ll see,” I said.

Instead of answering, Tabitha began to snore. Shaking my head, I stood and paced the crowded guest bedroom. While Chicory had spent the last week shut up in his lab, I’d been devoting my time to reading from a selection of books he’d picked out as well as performing exercises to enable me to channel more energy. I did feel stronger, more focused, but would it be enough?

I stopped at the window and released a shaky breath. The dream, my mother’s warning to run…

The Order wouldn’t be sending you if they thought you would fail, I reminded myself. Granted, they were a mysterious, often confounding, organization whose directives didn’t make a ton of sense sometimes—all right, *most* times—and yet they had been around for several millennia, suggesting they possessed more than an inkling of what

they were doing.

You're going to have to trust their judgment.

I looked toward the door as a burst of expletives sounded from down the hallway.

I would also have to trust that Chicory knew what the hell he was doing.

I EMERGED from my room the next morning and shouted in alarm. Across the dining room table, my cane was in a state of complete disassembly. I ran up to examine the carnage. The blade was without a hilt. The white opal stone, usually embedded in the staff, sat on the table's very edge. And a set of copper metal bands I hadn't even known belonged to the cane were scattered everywhere.

"My sword and staff!"

"Crotchety old thing," Chicory said, as though in agreement. My round little mentor appeared from the kitchen, blowing the steam from the mouth of a coffee mug. His mop of gray hair looked messier than usual, telling me he probably hadn't slept. Is this what he'd been doing all night?

"It—it's in pieces," I said, still not believing what I was seeing. Thin wood shavings covered the round table in what appeared to have been a failed attempt to inscribe runes into the staff. The result was chicken scratch.

Chicory took a loud slurp of coffee as he arrived beside me. "I've been trying to give her a needed upgrade, but she's not having it. Had to get a little rough with her, I'm afraid."

"You're going to put it back together, right?"

"Eventually," he replied, scratching his stubbly chin. "I'll let her sit like this for another day, see if that doesn't temper her spirits. Rest assured, once I complete the upgrade, she'll be better than new. And *you'll* be better prepared. I never intentionally send a wizard to his death. Well, unless so ordered."

"I appreciate that," I muttered, my gaze drifting over the scattered parts again. After ten years, the sword and staff had become extensions of me. I couldn't imagine life without them.

"There's extra coffee, if you'd like some," my mentor said.

Dragging a hand through my bed head, I gave a begrudging nod and shuffled into the kitchen. "Speaking of preparations," I called as I poured myself a mug of the strong-smelling brew. "When are we going to get into serious training? I mean, I appreciate the exercises and extra reading, but it's not the same as having spells slung at you. Blood spells, in particular."

The coffee shook slightly in the mug as I lifted it to my lips. The blood Marlow had stolen could be used to cast any number of things, including a death spell. Though such spells *did* take time to prepare, that time was getting shorter.

"Yes, yes, we'll get to that," Chicory replied irritably. "More important now is outfitting you."

I returned to the dining room, where my mentor was frowning over the cane parts, his bushy gray eyebrows nearly touching in the center. *Did* he know how to reassemble it? I pulled out a chair and sat.

"Do you mind going over what that will entail?" I asked.

"Outfitting you?" He lifted the tail of his corduroy sports jacket and hopped onto the chair across from me. I didn't have to look to know his feet weren't touching the floor. "Well, the first step is establishing a link to Marlow's hideout and getting you inside. No sense teaching you magic you won't be in a position to use. To that end, I've been tinkering with your blood."

"My blood?"

He took another loud slurp of coffee. We'd only been living together for a week, and already his habits were starting to annoy me. Besides the slurping, there was his singing in a loud baritone in the bathroom as well as his tendency to leave dirty dishes everywhere. A small plate with a half-eaten slice of toast and curdled eggs from two days before sat precariously on a window sill. Were it not for the magic surrounding the old house, the place would have been thick with flies.

"I drew a small sample from your neck the other night while you were asleep," Chicory said. "I didn't think you'd mind."

"Not at all," I replied thinly.

"Now, if Marlow *is* your father, about half of your magic came from him. The other half from your mother, of course. Fortunately, the qualities of the two are different enough that I've been able to set up a process that will distill out your mother's portion. Once that process is complete, I'll add an enhancer and re-infuse the blood back into you. For a time, your magical aura will be a dead ringer for Marlow's."

"He won't be able to sense me?" I asked, thinking about the hunting spell I'd cast a couple of weeks before. A hunting spell Marlow had detected and counterspelled, possessing Tabitha in the process. With three fingers, I traced the healed claw marks along my right cheek.

"No," Chicory confirmed. "You'll be able to penetrate whatever defenses he's employed and enter his domain unscathed." He hesitated for a beat. "Again, assuming he's your father."

"And once I'm inside?"

“Well, ah…” He coughed into his fist. “We’ll have a plan, of course.”

“Which is?”

Chicory grumbled for a moment before his eyes seemed to sparkle with an idea. “You said you wanted to get on with your training? Advance to something a little more challenging?”

“Yeah…” I answered carefully.

“Well, I think I have just the thing.”

He bustled away from the table and returned a moment later with a badly refolded map. He spread it over the table, knocking some of the cane parts onto the floor. My molars ground together as I stood and came around. The map showed a grid of Manhattan, circa 1930.

“A bit outdated,” I remarked.

“Here,” he said, tapping a brown square just north of Central Park.

I read the label. “Grace Cathedral?”

“They have a robe on exhibit believed to have been worn by John the Baptist. In fact, it belonged to a Franciscan monk who came along some centuries later, but the point here is that the robe is special. You see, this monk was a descendant of Saint Michael’s, but never told. An oversight by the Order, no doubt. In any case, he was an ascetic who took a vow of silence early in his career. For more than half a century, he walked softly and said not a word. It got to the point that his fellow monks were barely even aware he existed.”

“And those qualities became instilled in the robe,” I said, guessing the rest.

“Exactly, and can be bestowed upon the wearer.” He looked pointedly at me.

“Wait, you’re asking me to *steal* the robe from the church?”

“Borrow it,” Chicory countered. “We’ll put a duplicate in its place so as not to alarm anyone. When you complete your mission, we’ll return the original.”

“*If* I complete my mission. But what happened to all of your highbrow talk about following the rules? Acting responsibly? Not taking stupid risks? Doesn’t this sort of fly in the face of that?”

“Acting responsibly as a *wizard*,” Chicory said. “You’re not being asked to summon or perform dark magic. To the contrary, you’re obtaining an item in the service of *opposing* such magic. An item that belongs just as much to the Order as to the Church, after all.”

I considered that for a moment. “And if I’m caught?”

“Well, that’s sort of the point of the exercise, isn’t it? To not let that happen.”

I sighed. I had just gotten back into the good graces of the city and press, not to mention Detective Vega. And now Chicory was suggesting I return to Manhattan and commit grand larceny. “Do I

even need the robe?" I asked. "Why can't I just mix a stealth potion?"

Chicory's eyebrows seemed to bristle as he glared up at me. "Because stealth potions wear off, and then mentors have to get involved." I remembered him rescuing me from the band of angry druids in north Central Park the year before. "Not true for magical artifacts," he finished.

"I don't have my sword and staff." I looked dismally at the scattered parts.

"I'll give you a wand that's ready for use. Less obtrusive and it won't set off the metal detectors."

The wand was among several magical items that had come into the vampire Arnaud's possession. Following the vampire's demise, I acquired the items from the NYPD and gave them to Chicory for cleaning and redistributing. I still hadn't mentioned Arnaud's story about Grandpa stealing artifacts from fellow magic-users during the war against the Inquisition. I didn't fully believe the story and wanted to check it out for myself—assuming the Death Mage didn't kill me first. My more immediate concern, though, was staying out of jail.

"Well, what about the church threshold?" I said lamely. "It's not going to care for my, you know, companion."

"Who?"

"Thelonious, my incubus."

"Hmm, then you better get an invite," Chicory replied, refolding the map. The ungainly way he went about the job, ripping several of the seams, didn't give me much hope for my cane.

"How?" I asked.

"That's for you to figure out. Again, part of the point of the exercise."

"Great," I muttered.

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3

When Detective Vega raised her eyes from the scatter of files across her desk, the sharp concentration lines that converged in the center of her brow let out slightly. “Croft,” she said. “What’s up?”

I showed her a plain cup of coffee I’d bought from a street vendor and placed it on the corner of her desk. “Gourmet roast.”

She smiled wryly. “Thanks.”

“Am I catching you at a bad time?”

“Other than between a stabbing in Spanish Harlem and a double murder in Chelsea?” Fatigue weighed on her face when she shrugged. “At least we know it’s not ghouls. Do you have something for me besides coffee?”

I noticed that several files on the right side of her desk were for the Lady Bastet murder investigation. Officially, the mystic’s murder remained an open case. I had promised to keep Vega in the loop on my end of things, which was the least I could do after the help she’d given me that summer. At some point she and I had stopped being adversaries and become allies. She had even introduced me to her son the last time I’d seen her.

“Well, sort of part update, part request,” I said.

She frowned as she smoothed back her black hair and refastened her ponytail. “Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like this?”

“Which do you want first?” I asked, closing the door to the din of the Homicide unit. I took a seat in one of the folding metal chairs that faced her desk.

“Update,” she said.

“The suspect’s name is Marlow Stokes.”

Vega jotted it down. “Contact info?”

“That I don’t know.”

She raised her eyes, pen poised above the file.

“He’s not exactly … in this world,” I said.

“I’m listening.”

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that Vega’s openness to the supernatural had come a long way in the last year. “Are you familiar with the Greenbrier Bunker?” I asked.

“That place in West Virginia? Yeah, it was a relocation center for

the U.S. Congress when we thought the nukes were gonna fly. The reps would survive while the rest of us got radiated."

"Look at you," I said. "Miss U.S. History. Well, once upon a time, the magical order to which I belong faced a similar existential threat. They also built a bunker, but in a parallel world—a thought pocket."

"A thought what?"

"An imagined place made real, if that makes any sense. The thought pocket was called the Refuge. From the way my mentor describes it, the Refuge was modeled on a Grecian palace. Elevated, fortified, easy to defend. Anyway, the Order got through the crisis, but the Refuge sort of hung out in this parallel space."

"And that's where Marlow is?"

I nodded. "He accessed the Refuge decades ago and turned its powerful defenses to his own purposes. The Elders—the ones who created the thought pocket—can't even access it."

"I'll take your word for it," Vega said. "So he's beyond our reach?"

"Maybe not. I told you that he murdered my mother, right? What I didn't know at the time was that he might also be my father."

Vega's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, as if I needed a Freudian complex on top of everything else," I muttered. "To make a long story short, because of my similarity to Marlow's makeup, I might be able to slip inside the Refuge."

"And then what?"

"Well, I'm going to try to destroy an arcane book from which he gets his power. Once that's done, he'll be defenseless. My order will apprehend him and put him to death." I nodded at the file for Lady Bastet. "If it helps you close the case, I'll be willing to testify on the match between the residue found at the murder scene and Marlow's brand of magic."

"You don't sound very hopeful," she said.

"No? After the vampire situation, the DA's office seems a lot more open to—"

"Not about the case," Vega interrupted. "The whole thing."

"What do you mean?"

She set her pen down. "I'm getting to know you, Croft. When you believe in something, you get this intense, almost maniacal, look in your eyes. And when you don't, your eyes just sort of go dead."

I wasn't aware of that about myself, but now that she mentioned it, the backs of my eyes felt heavy, like they were trying to retreat into my skull. "Just a lot of unknowns right now, I guess. Whether or not he's my father, Marlow is a powerful mage. And I'm, well, a wizard with about a decade of practice under my belt—pre-puberty in magical terms."

“Isn’t your order helping you?”

“There is someone training me, yeah,” I said, picturing Chicory frowning down at the hopeless mess of my cane across the table. “But that sort of brings me to the request part.”

“You mean the part I’m not going to like?”

“Probably not.”

She sighed and circled a hand for me to continue.

“All right, on the *off* chance I’m arrested tonight…” I rubbed the back of my neck. “…can I count on you to intervene?”

She lowered her voice to a harsh whisper. “Arrested for what?”

I told her about the magical robe and how it could offer me extra protection inside the Refuge. “It’ll only be for a few days,” I assured her. “And there will be a replica up in the meantime.”

“Stealing is stealing, Croft. But stealing from a *church*?”

“Believe me, I know how sketchy that sounds. Especially since it’s my denomination. But with Marlow trying to call forth an evil being, I don’t think the Church would disapprove. I mean, one of the reasons churches came into being was to act as a bastion against this very thing.”

“Then why not just ask them for the robe?”

“I do have an in with the Bishop of New York,” I said, thinking about the official I’d rescued from the demon Sathanus the year before, “but the request would still have to go up the chain. We’re talking weeks or months, and with no guarantee they’d agree to the request.”

“And you don’t have weeks or months.” Vega lifted the coffee from the corner of her desk, cracked the plastic tab from the lid, and took a sip. She grimaced and set the cup back down. “All right.”

I blinked. “Really?”

But I didn’t need to ask. I could tell by her expression that my reasoning had gotten through. Though the law remained important to Vega, she had seen enough to know the law had to be weighed against larger threats—ones the mundane world wouldn’t necessarily understand.

I smiled in appreciation.

“Just do me a favor,” she said.

“Sure. Anything.”

“Don’t get caught.”

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4

I stood on the edge of a knot of tourists, several of them snapping photos of Grace Cathedral's hand-carved front doors. "…modeled on the doors from its sister cathedral in Florence," our guide was saying. I had signed up for the final church tour of the day, a one-hour in and out, though I wasn't planning on coming out. Not with this group, anyway.

I made a small adjustment to my fake beard—a precaution so no one would recognize me as the "star" of the mayor's recent eradication campaign—and listened as the guide finished her explanation of the doors.

"Now, if you'll follow me, we're going to go inside and look at the famous mural above the doorway."

I followed the group as far as the threshold. A curtain of energy hummed and pushed against me. I felt Thelonious shift uncomfortably, a dark spirit shying from the divine light.

"Are you coming?" the guide asked impatiently.

She was standing just beyond the threshold, the tour group filing through a metal detector behind her.

"Oh, can I come in?" I asked.

"You paid for the tour, right?"

I showed her my wrist band. "So that means I can…?" I gestured toward the door.

Her eyes widened as though to ask, *What are you, some kind of idiot?*

Just give me a goddamned invite, lady, I thought.

"Yes?" I prompted, gesturing at the door again.

"Um, *yeah.*"

That was all it took. With the personal invitation, the threshold relented. Though the ley energy here wasn't as powerful as at St. Martin's, I felt a portion of my wizarding power fall away as I stepped through the doorway and into the church's cool interior. Fortunately, I was only planning on casting a few minor invocations.

"All right," the guide said when we had reassembled beyond security. "If you'll look straight overhead, you'll see…"

I tuned her out as I got my bearings. We were standing at one end

of the massive nave. At the other end, past a series of statues, stained-glass windows, and iron gates that led onto side chapels, was the main altar. According to Chicory, the robe was on display near the altar, in the baptistery.

It took almost the full hour for the tour to arrive at the baptistery, a small, circular room with a child-sized baptism pool on a raised dais at its center. The water gurgled quietly as we moved past the stone basin.

"If you'll direct your attention up here," the guide said, "we have a very special piece on exhibit."

I stopped looking for a pump in the basin and raised my eyes to the far wall. About halfway up, between a pair of colorful saints images and encased in glass, was a tattered brown cassock, sleeves spread.

"The robe belonged to John the Baptist and was worn during his later years," the guide continued. "For centuries, it was believed to bestow divine protection on the wearer."

Let's hope you're right about that second bit, I thought.

As the tourists moved in to snap photos, I peered around. The security appeared basic. Iron gate over the entranceway, one security camera, probably an alarm on the glass case. I imagined that a guard or two patrolled at night, but the acoustics of the cathedral would make them easy to keep track of. Underneath my shirt, tucked into the back of my pants, was the ringer.

The tour ended back in the nave with an invitation for us to look around on our own for the final few minutes. Stepping into a shadowy archway, I pulled the wand from my inside coat pocket and whispered, *"Oscurare."* Even though the church threshold had sheared off a chunk of my power, the wand had no trouble absorbing the immediate light, deepening the shadows around me.

I proceeded through the archway and into an empty corridor.

Before long, I found an unlocked office that looked as though it was being used for storage. I slipped inside, hunkered into a corner behind a stack of chairs, and waited for nightfall.

FROM MY HIDING PLACE, I listened to the cathedral being secured, the echoes of doors closing, locks snapping home. I waited another hour for a wandering set of footsteps to taper off before I emerged with one of the chairs. The patrolling guard had taken up a post beside the front door. Music with an electronic beat issued from a phone whose screen outlined his face in white light.

Thank God for youth culture, I thought.

I eased across the nave and into the entrance to the baptistery, beyond the guard's view. A padlock secured the iron gate. One of these days I was going to have to learn how to pick these things. I inserted the wand into the padlock's shackle and whispered, *"Vigore."*

The expansion of energy was enough to crack a shaft. I waited to ensure the guard hadn't been alerted to the sound before removing the lock and opening the well-oiled gate.

Beyond a short entranceway stood the stone pool, the robe mounted on the wall beyond. I expanded my wizard's aura until something crackled inside the security camera above me. Then, calling light to the wand, I rounded the pool and placed the chair beneath the mounted robe.

"Still can't believe Chicory is having me do this," I muttered.

As I climbed onto the chair, a series of bubbles glugged from the pool behind me. I looked back, causing the chair to teeter. Nothing there. Swearing, I retrained my focus on the glass box.

A simple plunger lock with a lever arm held the box closed. Yeah, definitely alarmed. I swelled out my wizard's aura again. Behind the backing against which the robe was mounted, something popped and sent up a drift of smoke. I just had to hope it was the final piece of security. I had already worked out an escape plan for if things went sideways. And if sideways veered south, Vega was monitoring a police scanner, ready to intervene.

But Chicory was right. If I was going to have a chance against Marlow, I needed the robe.

Aiming the wand at the plunger lock, I whispered a force invocation. With a scrape, the lever slid out and the door opened. A hay-like odor of old fabric seeped out.

Easy enough.

I listened to ensure no one was coming before pulling out a series of slender pins that mounted the robe to the backing. How long would it take for someone to notice the camera was out of commission and come to investigate? I didn't know, nor did I intend to find out.

A minute later I slung the robe over a shoulder and began pinning up the ringer. It was my bathrobe, actually. Chicory had cast a powerful veiling spell over it to mimic the robe of John the Baptist, down to the frayed threads. As long as no one touched it, the ringer would pass muster.

I was leaning back to examine my work, when something tapped my right shoulder. I jerked my head around, but there was no one there. Another tap, this one on my left shoulder. Then on the crown of my head. When I touched the spot, my fingers came away moist.

What the…?

Droplets pattered the floor around me. I craned my neck back and

nearly shouted in alarm. Wavering above me was a giant snake's head, saliva dripping from its jaw. No, not saliva—baptism water. The entire creature was composed of it, its slender neck ending at the pool from which it had quietly risen.

A water elemental? I thought dumbly. *In a church?*

I dropped from the chair. With a sputtering hiss, the elemental drew back its head to strike.

I aimed the wand at it and whispered, *"Vigore!"*

The creature curled deftly around the brunt of the blast and dove down. Seizing the chair, I heaved it up like a shield. The impact of the elemental's head cracked the chair's wooden seat and knocked me to the ground. Water sprayed everywhere.

I scrambled to my feet, slipping and sliding toward the pool's other side. The elemental curled around and headed me off. It undulated from side to side in a menacing dance.

With my wand poised at ear level, I held out the fractured chair like a lion tamer and backed from the elemental. The moisture on the floor was already compromising my magic. If the elemental got a hold of me and dragged me into the pool, I was a dead man.

Even so, the analytical part of my mind was still trying to determine what it was doing here. Elementals made excellent guards, sure, and this one was taking its duties as seriously as cancer, but they also required powerful magic to manifest. I highly doubted the church kept a wizard on staff, given the institution's suspicious stance toward the arcane.

The elemental started into another sputtering hiss.

"Vigore!" I whispered harshly, this time directing my wand at the pool.

The force dove into the water, erupting in a massive spout that pulled the elemental with it. When the water collided into the ornate dome high above, the snake burst apart and rained down in a sudden cloudburst. I hoisted the chair overhead like an umbrella, sparing myself a drenching.

An elemental separated from its source was a doomed elemental, and this one was no exception—regardless of how it had come to be. I splashed through the water and retrieved the robe of John the Baptist from the floor. I then climbed onto the broken chair and closed the glass box. Channeling a force strong enough to swing the lever arm closed took more time, thanks to the moisture, but within moments, it was done. Exhaling, I stepped off the chair.

Wasn't pretty, I thought, *but mission accomplished.*

My gaze dropped to my feet. In the second it took me to realize the floor was no longer soaked, the elemental coiled around my upper body, crushing my arms to my sides and the air from my lungs. Magic

had reconstituted the damned thing. The elemental made two more swift passes around me and jerked me into the air, its face hissing inches from mine.

"Respingere!" I grunted, not caring who heard me now.

Energy sputtered through my mental prism but expired before it could manifest from the wand I held in a death grip.

Shit.

The elemental upended me. I kicked my legs as the room swooped. In the next moment, I was being plunged headfirst into the pool. I tried to twist and break free, but the elemental held me fast, the top of my head grinding against stone.

Think, think, think!

If the elemental hadn't come from the church, what did that leave? The robe of John the Baptist possessed magical properties, but the origin story—a monk and a vow of silence—didn't jibe with a guardian creature. Not as Chicory had told it, anyway, though my mentor's disorganized nature hardly inspired confidence.

I remembered looking skeptically at the wand he'd given me that morning, despite his insistence that he'd wiped it of any lingering magic. "As much of it as I could, anyway," he'd added before tossing it to me. Hadn't he said it once belonged to a seafaring wizard? A light went off in my head.

Oh, I don't frigging believe this.

I tightened my right fist to make sure the wand was still in my grip. I then worked my left hand over and grasped the casting end. As black spots began to crowd the edges of my vision, I bowed the wand away from my body. I grunted with the effort, forearms trembling—

Snap!

My inverted body dropped, and I fell from the pool. I landed on the floor of the baptistery on my back with a hard splash. I remained there for several moments, gasping and stunned. The culprit came to a rest in two pieces beside my head: the damned wand. Its nearness to water and a magical item, in this case the robe, had triggered the wand to call up a guardian elemental, something the seafaring wizard had no doubt trained it to do.

"Wiped it of any lingering magic, my ass," I muttered, pushing myself to my feet.

Chicory was going to get an earful when I got back. Right now, though, footsteps were approaching from the nave. I retrieved the pieces of wand, jammed them into my back pocket, and lifted the dripping robe. A beam of light swam around the entranceway. A moment later the guard appeared, and he directed his flashlight across the room.

I stiffened, having just pulled the robe on, hoping to hell it was as

good as advertised.

I watched the guard unclasp the holster holding his firearm. He lifted his walkie-talkie to his mouth. “I need everyone down here,” he said. “Something’s going on in the baptistery.”

Well, wonderful.

But when the guard’s light reached me, it kept moving, hesitating on the pool before flashing back to the toppled chair. “The lock on the gate’s busted,” he went on, “and there’s a chair in here.”

“Security cam’s out, too,” a voice squawked back. *“Exhibit still there?”*

The guard’s light illuminated the ringer. “Still here,” he confirmed.

“All right, we’re calling the NYPD. Let them handle it.”

“Fine by me,” the guard said.

He gave the baptistery a final pass with his flashlight, the beam hitting me once more, before leaving. I trailed him to the front of the church. The guard hadn’t the faintest idea I was on his heels. When he opened the door ten minutes later to let the police in—Officers Dempsey and Dipinski, it turned out—I slipped out behind them and pattered down the cathedral steps to the street.

I waited until I was a few blocks from the cathedral before I removed the robe and stuffed it into the back of my pants under my shirt. The heist had been a success, but my confidence was in the crapper. A mission that should have been a cinch had nearly gotten me killed.

With a wave and sharp whistle, I flagged down a cab.

Time to give Chicory that earful.

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5

"How did it go?" Chicory called as I slammed the front door behind me.

Around the corner from the entranceway, I found my mentor in the living room in a plush chair, stocking feet poking out from beneath Tabitha's bulk. He was stroking my cat's purring head while taking contented puffs from his pipe. An orange-tinted liqueur sat in a snifter on the end table. The thought that he had been relaxing while I was being dunked in a baptistery pool by a water serpent raised my hackles even more.

"How did it go?" I asked. "Other than nearly *drowning?*"

"Drowning?" Chicory's brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

I pulled the wand from my pocket and tossed the two pieces onto the coffee table. "This thing that you assured me was ready for use had enough frigging magic in it to call up a water elemental."

He frowned down at the broken instrument. "But you retrieved the robe?"

Sighing, I pulled it from the back of my pants and dropped it beside the wand pieces.

His face brightened. "Well, there you go! All's well that ends well, as I like to say."

"No, Chicory, you're not hearing me. You gave me a magical item that nearly killed me."

"And you said you wanted a test."

I glared at him. "Are you telling me you did that intentionally?"

He took another puff from his pipe, seeming to consider the question. "Well, no, actually," he said after a moment. "I must have missed some enchantment or other—but that's beside the point. The point is I can't prepare you for every eventuality. If you're to have any chance, you'll need to improvise on the fly. Tonight was good practice. You encountered an unexpected challenge and you overcame it. Well done. Though I do wish you wouldn't have snapped it in half. Wands of that caliber are incredibly hard to come by."

"Look," I said, deciding to let the wand comment go, "it's one thing for the unexpected to come from your opponent, but it's a hell of

another for it to come from your own corner man."

"I'm not following, I'm afraid."

I pressed my lips together. "Any day now I'm going to be sent to the Refuge. Up until tonight I was afraid that I wouldn't be prepared, that it would be a one-way trip. But now I'm terrified the preparations are going to kill me before the Death Mage ever gets a crack. I mean, you send me off with a cursed wand, my staff and sword are in pieces, and the blood you're distilling … I'm seriously starting to wonder if I should let you inject me with it."

Chicory chuckled.

"What the hell's so funny?"

He set his pipe down beside the snifter, lifted Tabitha with both hands, resettled her on the ottoman, and stood and waved for me to follow.

"Where are we going?" I asked in annoyance.

"Just come along."

Muttering, I followed him to a door beneath the staircase to the attic. For the past week, I'd assumed it led onto a closet, but when Chicory opened it, I could see the top of a wooden staircase descending into darkness. The thought of going underground stretched the skin over my chest like a drum and thinned my breaths.

"I'm not going down there."

"Believe me," he said, "you'll want to."

Chicory waved his wand, manifesting a bobbing orb of white light. Chicory gave the wand another flick, and the orb began to descend the stairwell, illuminating the way. Chicory followed it down. I fell in behind him despite my anger, his words just vague enough to entice me.

After a steep descent of several sharp turns, the stairwell deposited us onto the dirt floor of a basement. Chicory flicked the wand again, and the orb rose to a set of rafters fifteen feet above us, suffusing the entire basement with light. The space was surprisingly large and must have extended beyond the house to the borders of the property.

"I believe that belongs to you," Chicory said.

I looked at where he nodded. About twenty feet ahead of us lay Grandpa's cane.

"It's in one piece," I observed.

"Aye."

But does it still work? I thought dubiously.

I arrived at the cane, almost afraid to touch it. I lifted it from the ground and tested the white opal with a finger. It was re-embedded in the wood, as secure as ever. Runes lined the staff. Not the chicken scratch I'd seen that morning, but ornate letters, each one seeming to hum with power. I drew a breath and pulled the sword from the staff.

The blade released easily. I made a few thrusts and cuts, half expecting the blade to feel loose or clunky—or even fall off—but it was as light and sturdy as I remembered, and even seemed to zing.

"I'll be damned," I muttered. "You actually fixed it."

And hadn't he said something about an enhancement?

"En garde!" Chicory shouted.

I wheeled just as a fireball ripped from his wand and sped toward my head. With no time to invoke a shield, I threw the staff up into its path. As the fireball collided into it, I squinted my eyes closed to the flames that would inevitably break past it and burn my face. But the fireball just … stopped. It was as though the staff had sucked it right out of the air.

I was bringing the staff around to examine it when two more fireballs flew from Chicory's wand. More confident now, I slashed the staff high and low, batting them out of existence.

When I saw Chicory preparing to cast again, I ran at him. *"Protezione,"* I called.

Light swelled from the staff's opal. Enhanced by the runes, the light crackled into a formidable shield around me. A succession of fireballs broke against it, each one vanishing into harmless wisps of smoke. When I was mere feet from Chicory, he unleashed a firestorm.

I waited patiently for the flames gushing around me to expire, then touched the tip of my blade to his paunch.

"Got you," I said.

Chicory cocked a bushy eyebrow. "Oh?"

A low moan sounded behind me. I wheeled to find a pair of earth elementals pushing themselves up from the ground using fists the size of wrecking balls. Powerful magic wavered around them.

"Oh, c'mon," I complained.

"No shields this time," Chicory said, snatching my staff away.

"Wha—?" When I turned to reclaim the staff, Chicory was already gone.

Oh, no he didn't.

But he had, and I was on my own. The ground shook as the elementals, fully formed, plodded toward me.

"Vigore!" I shouted, aiming my sword at the nearer one.

The force that erupted from the blade broke around the elemental's protection, barely slowing it. Its partner came around my other side, blocking the stairwell as an escape route. I backed away, sword held out. I considered invoking a stronger force blast, but it would only deplete my power. I feinted right and attempted to dart left, but they herded me into a corner. When I tried to split them, the closer elemental planted a leg in front of me. The other one raised a giant fist.

“Chicory?” I called shakily. “A little help?”

This was part of my training, I got it. But without my staff, and these guys encased in powerful defensive magic, I couldn’t do a blasted thing. I expected Chicory to suspend the session, show me what I’d done wrong, and then run it again so I could apply what he’d taught me.

Instead, the elemental’s arm descended like a falling tree.

“Whoa!” I shouted, raising my sword in an attempt to parry the heavy blow.

I felt almost nothing as the blade cleaved the elemental’s arm in two. The magic holding the creature together dispersed with a shudder, its decaying fist raining chunks of earth over me. The rest of its body collapsed into a mound. The other elemental looked at its fallen partner and backed away.

“Not so big and moany now, are you?” I said, advancing on it.

When the elemental turned to run, I launched the sword like a javelin. The blade pierced the center of its back. The elemental fell forward and, under its own momentum, scattered across the floor.

“Booya!” I shouted.

I looked around to make sure Chicory wasn’t throwing anything else at me before kneeling to unearth the sword. When I stood again, my mentor was in front of me, handing me back my staff.

“Do you still doubt me?” he asked.

I held the sword and staff out at arm’s length and examined them. “What in the hell did you do to these?”

“To the staff, I added an absorption charm. Like a sponge, it will soak up any offensive magic that hits it.”

“*Any* magic?” I asked, examining the runes more closely now.

“Well, up to a point. But it’s a powerful charm. Those weren’t first-level fire balls I was slinging at you. Even better, the magic it absorbs will bolster the staff’s defensive capabilities.”

I remembered the strength of my shield and nodded. “What about the sword?”

“That was easier, actually.” His eyes shifted with mine to the blade. “Your grandfather had imbued it with an enchantment that can cleave through magic. You’d just yet to channel enough of your energy through it to access it. The enchantment is very powerful, and it works just as well on magical defenses as on magical beings. Again, to a point.”

I moved the sword and staff through the air, my anger at Chicory almost forgotten as I considered their enhanced power. Throw in the robe of John the Baptist, and I was beginning to feel like I had a chance.

“So if I get close enough to Marlow to strike…” I started.

“The blade could destroy him, yes,” Chicory said. “But we’d rather you use it to destroy Lich’s book.”

I slotted the blade back into the staff. “Why?”

“Because the book is the source of Marlow’s power, and it’s safer.”

I thought of the man who had set fire to my mother and then watched as the flames consumed her. I imagined him smiling behind the gold mask, reveling in the power he held over a woman he’d rendered defenseless, a woman who had birthed his child. The anger inside me rose up more fiercely than the remembered flames. I grunted as I imagined myself driving the blade through Marlow’s chest, giving it a hard twist. *Surprise, you piece of—*

“Everson,” Chicory said sharply, bringing me back. “You talked about your fear of being ill prepared? It’s much worse to be fully prepared only to be subverted by revenge. Find and destroy the book. Depriving the mage of his power will be justice enough. We’ll take care of the rest.”

“And if he tries to stop me?” I said, my knuckles still white around the sword’s hilt.

“Just don’t go looking for a fight, is what I’m saying.” Chicory’s eyes seemed to waver.

“There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“I’m getting there,” he said irritably. “When you asked earlier, I said the blade *could* destroy him.”

“What, now you’re saying it can’t?”

“Would you stop and listen? It could if he gives you a chance to use it against him. Whisperer magic is different from the magic you’re accustomed to up here.”

“Different how?”

“When Lich nearly overthrew his siblings, it wasn’t a simple matter of being more powerful than the others. No, he tapped into a magic that bends minds, shapes thoughts. Whisperer magic. Lich made his siblings see what wasn’t there. Believe what wasn’t real. He turned them against one another, nearly driving them insane in the process. Were it not for the oldest Elder, who was able to resist the magic, Lich would have destroyed them all.”

“What about the staff?” I asked.

“The staff will absorb common magic. However, if Marlow or his followers get inside your head, all bets are off.”

“Oh,” I said, my confidence flagging again.

“That’s why we’re telling you to focus on the book. With the distilled blood, you’ll be able to access the Refuge and slip past any wards. With the robe of John the Baptist you’ll evade detection. With the staff, you’ll frustrate magical attacks. And with the sword, you’ll destroy the book. You need never face Marlow.”

“Just wish you would’ve told me about Whisperer magic sooner.”

“Would you rather I had told you when you still believed the preparations for the mission would kill you?”

He had a point. “So how would I even know if I encountered Whisperer magic?”

A shadow seemed to pass over Chicory’s face. “That’s the thing, Everson. There’s no good way to know.”

“What do you mean?”

We had been walking back toward the staircase, and now he stopped and sat on one of the bottom steps. I stood facing him. The orb of light arrived above us and sputtered quietly. While waiting for Chicory to answer, I couldn’t help but appreciate the power he wielded—summoning fireballs and elementals, all while maintaining an illumination orb, and with almost no effort. I’d given him less credit as a magic-user than he deserved.

“If you allow them inside your head,” he said, “they’ll invert reality, turning the ugliest lies into the most enchanting truths. No matter what you do, you won’t be able to see your way out. Only the strongest magic can penetrate it. Elder magic.”

“What’s the point of them using magic?” I asked. “Why wouldn’t they just kill me?”

“They’ll first try to subvert you. How do you think Marlow built his army of resistance? Your mother was an exception, convincing Marlow she’d joined the rebellion willingly. An intercepted communication tipped him off.” He looked over at me with sober eyes. “I’m sorry to bring her up again, Everson. But your mother’s sacrifice is the reason the Order was able to learn as much about Marlow and the Front as it did. Marlow took a huge risk emerging from his hiding to murder Lady Bastet in his attempt to keep the truth from you, from us.”

I nodded, understanding that was why there had been no signs of resistance at the murder scene. Marlow had infiltrated the mystic’s mind with Whisperer magic before cutting her throat and then ripping her cats’ heads from their bodies to make the crime look like the work of werewolves. He’d then shape-shifted into a cat and fled the scene as I was arriving.

“Why didn’t Marlow kill me too?” I asked. “He had a chance.”

Chicory sighed. “We’ve been wondering the same. Perhaps he believed the murder would be enough to throw you off his scent.” My mentor’s voice turned darker. “Or maybe he has plans to use you down the road.”

I remembered the chilling voice from the nightmare.

Join us, Everson. Join the cluster. Become one.

Everson … verson … son.

“And we must remember,” Chicory said, “Marlow is controlled by the Whisperer, a being as old as the universe. If you think the Elders are hard to read, well…” His chuckle was without humor. “There’s no telling that creature’s plans.”

“Hey, sorry for giving you crap upstairs. I just…”

“It’s daunting, I know,” he said. “But feeling better, are we?”

I considered the magical robe, the enhanced sword and staff, Chicory’s warning about not confronting Marlow. “I am, yeah,” I admitted. “When will the blood be ready?”

“Another week, I imagine,” Chicory replied, pushing himself to his feet. “And now that we have you outfitted, we’ll spend the remaining time in simulations, preparing you for the task ahead. How does that sound?”

“Best news I’ve heard today,” I said.

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A week later I was back in the basement, staring down at the casting circle Chicory had created. It wasn't large, but it was sophisticated, featuring several sigils I'd never seen before. Beneath the orb of light overhead, metal shavings glittered in the circle's earthen grooves.

"Let's have a look at you," Chicory said, turning me toward him.

His curmudgeon's lips curled and fussed as he looked me up and down. I'd dressed as he'd instructed: a dark shirt and pants with enough pockets to hold several spell items. I'd draped the tattered robe of John the Baptist over my right forearm. Around my waist was a belt to secure my sword cane. When Chicory's gaze fell to my running shoes, he gave a critical grunt but said nothing.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, eyes returning to mine.

"Honestly? Like I'm about to hurl all over the casting circle."

"Nerves, hm? Just remember what we practiced."

I nodded, going back over the last week of training, a week in which everything seemed to come together. The books Chicory had had me read, the exercises to grow my casting prism, the enhanced weapons. Combining these with my mentor's instructions, I'd been able to steal past complex defenses, elude or slay a variety of creatures, and dispel potent magic. Indeed, it seemed as though I'd grown more as a wizard during that time than in the ten years prior.

"This is going to sting a little."

Before I realized what he was doing, Chicory had my elbow in his grip and was sticking the needle of a copper syringe into the crook of my arm. I flinched at the bite. Chicory depressed the plunger, and the bluish blood in the glass tube disappeared inside me.

He removed the needle and held his thumb over the injection site. As he chanted softly, I felt the distilled blood diffusing through me, my father's essence displacing my mother's.

After a minute, he stepped back and nodded. "You're ready."

I took a steadying breath and stepped into the casting circle. This was it. When I turned to face Chicory, I noticed that Tabitha had come down, her green eyes swimming through the gloom outside the orb's light. She sauntered up and rubbed her body against Chicory's leg.

"Don't give him a hard time while I'm away," I said.

She snorted. "Compared to the drills you put me through, this is going to be a vacation."

I shook my head before addressing Chicory. "Thanks for looking after her."

"Not a problem." He checked his pocket watch. "It's almost dusk, though. We need to start the ritual while the barrier between our realms is thinnest." From a jacket pocket, he produced a black book and opened it. While he wet his thumb and leafed through the pages, I reviewed the plan in my mind, up to finding and destroying Lich's book. A frightening thought hit me.

"Wait!" I said. "How am I going to get back?"

"Ah, yes," Chicory said as though he'd forgotten something minor. He reached forward and mashed his thumb between my brows. A small bolt of energy pierced my forebrain and smoldered behind my eyes and deep in my ears. A bonding spell. "There," he said, stepping back again. "When you're ready to come home, concentrate as hard as you can, and I'll retrieve you."

"Great," I said, wondering what would have happened if I hadn't said anything.

"And if this works, if Marlow is your father, I *will* see you again. You're as reckless as a child sometimes, but you're more than capable. You've proven that this week."

"Thanks." And I meant it.

Aiming his wand at the circle, Chicory uttered a Word. The circle glowed white and closed around me. Beyond the hum of energy, his lips moved as he read from a book of the First Order.

Tabitha watched with bored eyes.

I smiled back at her even as a lump swelled in my throat. I had to remind myself that if Marlow was not my father, the blood that coursed inside me wouldn't allow me past his defenses. I would be repelled back here. Which meant the tide of emotions I was feeling at the prospect of never seeing Tabitha or Chicory again would be for nothing.

I was just beginning to settle into that thought when I realized I was no longer in the basement.

EXCEPT FOR A SLIGHT TINGLING, there had been no warning. One moment I was standing in Chicory's casting circle, the next, I was in a forest. A cold breeze carrying a stench of decay batted my hair and clacked the branches overhead. Beyond a low ceiling of ashen clouds, the sun was setting. Or rather *a* sun was setting. I wasn't in our world

anymore. I was inside the Refuge.

Which means the Death Mage is my father.

The knowledge didn't bowl me over. Ever since Chicory had told me of the Order's suspicion, a part of me had begun to accept it as truth. Nana's story about my father being a hippie had never jibed, not in my child's mind and even less so when I discovered my magic as an adult. My grandparents were trying to protect me, God love them. This explained from what.

Stuffing down a swirl of emotions, I checked my belt and patted my various pockets. Everything had made the journey with me.

"Let's go ahead and put you on, then," I whispered, donning the robe of John the Baptist.

As had happened in the cathedral, a quiet descended over me and calmed my thumping heart. I peered around. The dark forest looked uniform in all directions, reminding me of my recurring dream. But I wasn't a powerless child and I didn't plan to wander aimlessly.

I had a target.

Kneeling, I wiped out a small circular area in the forest floor. The carpet of rotten leaves hid jelly-covered toadstools, which I wiped away, too. With my sword, I scratched my family's casting circle into the earth and filled the grooves with copper filings. I then produced a Ziploc bag from one of my pockets and upended it over the circle. A clump of cat hair landed in its center—hair which held Marlow's casting residue from when he'd murdered Lady Bastet.

A current of fear wormed through me. The last time I had cast through the hair, Marlow had sensed me. He'd attacked me. This time, Chicory assured me, he couldn't. The distilled blood that had delivered me to the Refuge would veil me from Marlow's detection.

Hope to hell Chicory's right.

"Cerrare," I said, closing the circle.

I incanted then, my staff aimed at the hair. The clump of hair shifted and rolled, sending up smoke, which the staff's orb inhaled. I braced for a counterattack, but none came. Within moments, the staff was tugging me from the circle, in a direction opposite from where the sun had set.

He's here.

Planting a foot against the tug, I returned what remained of the hair to the bag, pocketed it, and then broke the circle and covered it with debris. Veiled or not, I couldn't get careless. The cane pulled me past trees, toward the man who had killed my mother.

Not to confront him, I reminded myself as black anger smoldered inside me. *To find Lich's book.*

Before long, the forest thinned and opened onto a wide plain. A rocky hill rose from its center, an ancient palace at its plateaued

pinnacle. Though impressive, the scene was hardly the stuff of postcards. The palace was made of black stone, the columned stories that stood atop one another unwieldy and wicked looking. Here and there firelight burned in windows.

Looks like someone's home.

I scanned the open plain around the palace for guards. Instead, I spotted the silhouettes of what looked like large, hunchbacked dogs. Wargs, I realized, vicious predators with keen senses of sight and smell. Marlow was using them as an outer ring of security.

I checked to ensure my robe was secure around me before stepping from the trees and toward the palace. I moved quickly and quietly, keeping track of the wargs as I went. There were at least two dozen of them patrolling the large plain. Every so often, one would stop and raise a ragged muzzle before resuming its patrol.

Realizing I was on a collision course with one of the wargs, I crouched, retreated several steps, and held still. The approaching patrol was the size of a small rhino, its hair dark and bristly. Harsh breaths huffed from its wet muzzle.

When it got to within twenty feet of me, the creature stopped and raised its head. I stiffened. A jelly-like substance dripped from the warg's face. Bald patches showed over its coat, where the same substance appeared to have corroded through. The warg's face waxed toward me, toadstools ringing its glowing eyes like blackheads. Could it sense me?

I tightened my grip on my sword, debating whether or not to strike before the warg could send up an alarm. With a final snuff, the warg lowered his head again and resumed patrolling.

Exhaling, I set my sights on a staircase that climbed to a wall surrounding the palace complex. I had considered circling the hill to search for a more concealed way up, but I didn't like how the warg had looked in my direction. And the way that stuff was eating into its face…

I grimaced and hurried my pace.

Near the staircase, I opened my wizard's senses. The approach looked clear, but a ward protected the staircase in a field of barbed energy. I followed a path up to it. The energy blocking the staircase crackled and spit. My enhanced blade might cleave it, but without Marlow knowing? No, better to leave the ward intact and trust that the distillation of blood would fool it.

I was bracing myself to step through when something rammed into my side.

I stumbled into a backpedal from the largest warg I'd ever seen. It crouched onto its haunches, equally startled. The warg must have doubled back on its patrol.

Now, it came sniffing forward. When I stepped to one side, it pivoted toward me, a growl shaking the thick foam over its fangs. The damned thing could sense me. When I inhaled what smelled like spores, I imagined them communicating back to the toadstools and slimy fungi that covered the warg's face, their root-like threads penetrating its canine brain, whispering to it.

I took a quick look around. Two more wargs were approaching, eyes glowing a sickly green through the darkness. I gauged the distance to the staircase—about fifteen feet away—but the large warg had cut me off. With my sword held out, I slid the staff into my belt and dug into my pockets.

Where are you?

At last my fingers encountered the golf-ball sized rocks. Coughing grenades. I pulled one out and whispered, *"Attivare."* The rock tingled as the magic at its core came to life.

I turned and hurled the grenade as far from the palace as I could. With a bark, the large warg charged me. I pivoted and brought my sword around, twisting my grip so the flat of the blade caught it instead of the edge. Metal rang against the side of the warg's head. The beast stumbled past me and ate dirt.

I backed toward the staircase as the warg recovered and wheeled. The skin over one half of its face had shorn off, revealing plates of bone.

Fifty yards away, the grenade landed, releasing a burst of human coughing. The other two wargs that had been closing in on me turned and sprinted toward the fake sound. The large warg looked over its shoulder, then back in my direction. It took two stalking steps forward.

Go, dammit. Go with the others.

The warg moved its sniffing head from side to side, as though no longer sure where I was. Maybe the result of half the fungi being wiped from its face. I switched to an underhanded grip, ready to thrust the blade up into the warg's heart if it lunged again.

Its glowing gaze roamed all around me.

At last the creature released a snort and sprinted off to join the others.

I let out a trembling sigh and hurried past the defensive ward. A searing heat broke through me, but thanks to the blood match, my magic remained intact. I started up the steps. Very soon I realized that the palace complex wasn't composed of black stone, but covered in black mold.

Higher and higher I climbed. On the dwindling plain below, the wargs had resumed their patrols. I didn't slow until I reached a landing that ended at the defensive wall. My staff tugged me toward a

large door that hummed with locking magic. My sword could cleave it, but would that send up an alarm?

I scanned the rampart high above. I couldn't see anyone—or anything—patrolling its length. The dome of protective energy that extended over the palace looked to be identical to the ward at the base of the hill. It would let me through.

Judging the wall to be about twenty feet high, I took several steps back, sword aimed down. With a running start, I whispered, *"Forza dura!"*

The energy from the sword erupted against the landing and launched me up. As the cold air rushed past my ears, I saw that I was short. Afraid of overshooting the wall, I'd gone too soft. At the height of my parabola, I stretched out an arm and managed to catch the lip of the rampart. My body banged against the wall, but I held on, working my fingers into a slimy groove in the stonework. I threw my sword arm over and heaved myself the rest of the way onto the rampart. As I fell, I broke through the second ward in another searing wave.

I bit back a grunt and lay panting. I was alone on the walkway and, by all appearances, still hidden. Above me, the columned palace teetered into the night sky. I stood and looked down. Far below, a courtyard led onto a lower level of the palace. But the hunting spell was tugging me in the direction of a guard tower farther along the rampart.

I entered the square tower through a low archway and descended a spiral staircase. Though torches burned in brackets in the wall, the shut-in air carried a stench of rot. After one flight, I left the stairs and crept down a covered walkway. It soon opened onto a large columned room, the hunting spell tugging me toward a doorway on its far side. Halfway across the room, I stopped cold.

I knew this place.

The large column to my right was black at its base, but not from mold. I knelt down to examine it more closely. The cracks in the floor that radiated from the column held bits of gray ash.

This is it, I thought in numb certainty. *The site of my mother's execution.*

I rested my head against the column's cold stone. Despite having experienced my mother's death in Lady Bastet's scrying globe, despite the event having been confirmed by Chicory, being here, now, in the same spot, made it real in a way those experiences hadn't. My heart broke as I remembered the way her cracked lips had shaped her final words.

I love you, Everson.

"I'm here to finish what you started," I whispered, blinking back

tears.

A gargling voice made me turn. A pair of black-robed figures were entering through the far doorway. I rose slowly and, tamping down the hunting spell, gripped my sword and staff.

Were you among them? I asked silently of the two. *Among the ones who called my mother a traitor? Who hurt her? Who stood here and watched her execution?*

Anger tightened my grip until it hurt.

The book, a more rational part of my mind whispered urgently. *You're here to find and destroy the book. Do anything that raises an alarm, and you can kiss the mission goodbye.*

That seemed to work. Forcing down my anger, I moved behind the column as the robed figures came closer, continuing their gargling exchange. I was preparing to let them pass when, deep inside their hoods, torchlight glistened over large, inhuman eyes. Fish's eyes.

Revulsion turned to fresh rage.

You were there, I decided, lips trembling. *Both of you. And you watched her burn.*

With an anguished cry, I swung my blade at the nearer figure's head.

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The blade flashed, ripped through fabric and flesh, and came out the other side on a gout of dark fluid. Something wet thudded to the stone floor and rolled over. I glanced down to find large, vacant eyes staring up at me from a scaly face covered in the same fungi I'd seen on the wargs.

The creature's companion let out a sputtering shriek and jumped back. Before it could get a fix on me, I drove the sword into its gut. The blade broke through an exoskeleton, and I heaved the hilt up with both hands. The creature gargled, the hood falling back from its face. A pair of vile fish's eyes searched around in vain before seeming to settle on me.

"I can play judge and jury too," I grunted.

The blade broke through the creature's breastplate and cleaved its heart. I yanked the blade back, depositing the creature beside its headless companion. I then stared down at the two of them for several moments, panting in the horror and exhilaration of what I'd just done.

I dragged their bodies into a dark corner of the room and dusted the main floor with dragon sand. A whispered "*fuoco*" ignited the sand, evaporating the trails of fluid and hiding evidence of the slaughter. No other creatures had come to investigate, suggesting no alarms had been raised.

Need to keep my anger in check from now on, though, I thought as I cleaned my blade on the side of my pants. It had been the dual shock of standing in the same spot where my mother had been slain and then suddenly seeing the creatures who had participated in the act. Still, I didn't know how these things communicated with one another. If it was through the fungal growth that seemed to coat everyone and everything, word of the attack could reach others.

I restored the hunting spell. As it pulled me toward the far doorway, I wondered about the two I'd just slain. I had thought the Front was a splinter group of magic-users, of humans. But those fish eyes… Was that what decades of worshiping the Whisperer had done? Devolved them?

The hunting spell led me down a corridor and up several flights of stairs. More robed figures appeared, their unhurried cadence telling

me news of their murdered companions had not reached them. I eased into shadows until they passed and their gargling voices receded away.

In another flight, my cane jerked me from the stairwell and into a small courtyard on the top level of the palace. Cold wind blew around me. From a building opposite me, low chanting sounded. I stiffened as one voice climbed above the others. The forceful yanks of my cane notwithstanding, I knew the voice belonged to Marlow. The Death Mage.

My heart surged into a full gallop as I canceled the hunting spell, pulled my cane into sword and staff, and crept across the courtyard. The building was tall and narrow, moldy columns bracketing a doorway through which greenish firelight glowed. I edged along a shadow beside the doorway and peered inside, the robe of John the Baptist concealing me.

The altar-like room featured a rectangular pool of water at its center. Statues of what looked like gods and goddesses—the original saints, most likely—rose along the perimeter of the room to act as pillars. But the statues, along with the rest of the room, were covered in a gunk that dangled in thick ropes and dripped over the twenty or so robed figures chanting around the pool below.

My gaze followed the pool to the far end where a tall figure presided over the chanting, one arm raised. The green flames that rose from the pyres on either side of him glistened from a gold mask inside his hood. My stomach clenched into a nauseous fist.

It's him.

I picked up the chanting as I watched him. The words were nonsensical, but they evoked visceral sensations of death and decay. At the end of the verse, something stirred inside the pool's foul waters. Another elemental? I could just make out a viscous web-work of black energy that seemed to unite the chanters to whatever lurked below the waters.

The Whisperer, I realized. *This is the ritual that opens the portal.* It was work Lich had begun centuries before and that Marlow had resumed upon finding his book. The larger the portal, the more powerful Marlow and the Front would become, and the more likely they would be to defeat the Order.

Ultimately, the Whisperer itself would emerge.

My eyes fell back to the pool in time to see a tentacle lash up before disappearing into the depths again. Beyond the pool, Marlow dropped his hand momentarily before raising it and resuming the chant.

A charge shot through me. *A book. He just turned the page of a book.* I eased forward, squinting. Yes, it was hard to see, but it was there, his

black robe camouflaging the tome he palmed at his chest, tendrils of dark magic twisting from its pages.

Okay, I thought, *deep breaths.*

I slid my staff into my belt and reached into a pocket until I encountered a vial. A light shake told me it was the dragon sand. With a trembling hand, I loosened the cap. I doubted Marlow kept the book on him twenty four-seven. I could hold out for a more opportune moment, but with a pair of corpses downstairs waiting to be discovered, the risk felt too great.

I had to strike now.

I gauged the distance to the book and aimed my sword at it. The tip of the blade wavered as I drew a breath.

"Vigore!" I shouted, drawing the sword sharply back.

The force invocation hooked the book and yanked it from Marlow's grasp. The book shot across the room, over the pool, between the chanters, and into the doorway, where it smacked into my raised hand like a fastball into a catcher's mitt. I ducked around the side of the doorway, already bringing the book down and flipping through the leather-bound tome.

"Someone's taken the codex," Marlow shouted. "Stop him!"

The chanting broke into a confusion of shouts, and I could hear more splashing from the pool.

This is the book. This is it!

Heart slamming, I dropped the book at my feet and pierced it with the blade. The magic swirling around it fractured and broke apart. The plan was actually working! Emptying the vial of dragon sand over the defenseless tome, I leaped back and shouted, *"Fuoco!"*

Flames exploded from the book and gushed into the altar doorway. Voices and shrieks sounded from beyond. The pages of the incinerated tome floated up and disintegrated into ash.

Chicory! I called through our link as I backed away. *It's done! The book's destroyed!*

I chucked away the empty vial of dragon sand and drew the staff from my belt. I raised it just as a black bolt of energy shot past the flames. The enhanced staff drew the bolt inside, where the energy swirled. With shouts, two of the chanters broke through the flames.

"Rifleterre," I commanded, aiming the staff at them in turn.

The energy absorbed by the staff discharged twice, nailing the chanters and knocking them to the ground.

Did you catch that Chicory? I called again. *I'm ready to come home!*

More figures moved beyond the flames. I jammed a hand into a pocket holding several lightning grenades and pulled two of them out. *"Attivare!"* I shouted, throwing them into the doorway. Lightning ripped from the heavens and slammed through beam and stone,

collapsing the entranceway.

Ears ringing, I wheeled and sprinted across the courtyard toward the stairwell I'd arrived by. I was nearly there when a battalion of the fish-headed creatures came swarming up. Gargling at one another, they fanned around me, scimitars in hand. I enclosed myself in a crackling shield as the first wave moved in. Blades slashing, they set upon the shield.

"Respingere!" I called.

A potent white pulse detonated from the shield, sending the attackers tumbling over the courtyard and each other. Before they could fully recover, I hacked a path through them to the stairwell and descended, throwing a shield over the opening behind me to block their pursuit.

Chicory? I tried again. *Now would be a* really *good time.*

I was beginning to worry that the link wasn't working, that he couldn't hear me, when the place on my forehead where he'd mashed his thumb began to tingle. The sensation spread over my body. Any moment I expected to find myself back in the basement. But as quickly as the sensation came, it began to fade. Chicory's voice echoed through my thoughts.

Go back to the place where you arrived.

The forest? I asked, still racing down the stairs. *Why not here?*

The barrier is thinner there.

But I destroyed the book—there shouldn't be *a barrier!*

His voice broke in and out, but I caught something about the dissolution process taking time. The tingling sensation disappeared from my forehead. A pressure remained behind my eyes and deep in my ears, but those had persisted since he'd first stamped me.

Chicory? I tried again.

No answer.

Great, so I was going to be escaping the palace and re-crossing the plain of wargs with the place on full alert. I grunted out a curse. The hunting spell had shown me the shortest route in; retracing my steps seemed the surest bet for getting back out. If I could remember the way.

I emerged from the staircase, raced down a corridor, and found myself in the pillared room where my mother had been executed and I had slain the two creatures. It still smelled of burned blood.

I was halfway across the room when a robed figure filled the doorway ahead of me. "Stop," he commanded. Recognizing his voice, I skidded to a halt, heart pounding in my ears. A gold mask glistened from the figure's hood as he strode forward and drew his wand. Marlow had escaped the altar room, evidently, but how in the hell had he beaten me down here?

The mask turned from one side to the other, searching for me.

"Vigore!" I shouted, thrusting my sword toward him.

A storm of energy burst from the blade. The Death Mage sliced his wand through the air, and the force broke to either side of him, shaking the walls. I dug in my pocket for the remaining lightning grenade as he continued his confident advance.

Let's see how you like a face full of electricity, pal.

"Attivare!" I called and winged the grenade at him.

"Ghioccio," he answered, slicing his wand again. The magical grenade thudded to the ground at his feet, encased in a snowball.

I summoned a shield around me and began to search for another long-range weapon when I remembered that with the absorbing properties of the staff, the Death Mage couldn't hurt me. Conversely, with the magic cleaving properties of the sword, I could hurt him.

Badly.

Still, Chicory's warnings about Whisperer magic stole through my thoughts. I couldn't just run at him headlong. I eased beside the charred pillar and adjusted my sweaty grip on the sword.

"Show yourself," Marlow demanded, coming nearer. "Who are you?" Though the mage could sense me, the robe was still cloaking my identity. His footsteps came closer and closer until they were almost beside me.

Someone who thinks you're a lowlife piece of shit, I thought, and stepped out. The sword glinted as I put everything into my swing. The blade disappeared into the neck of his gown and came out the other side. Only there had been no resistance. And the mage was still standing.

What the…?

"Ah!" he called triumphantly.

In a blink, he was several feet from where he'd been standing, black energy curling around the end of his wand. An illusionist? He snapped the wand toward me. The bolt collided into my shield, knocking me backward. I recovered my footing and thrust the sword at his torso. Once more, the blade disappeared into his gown as though it were thin air.

Marlow was suddenly on my other side, fresh black bolts cracking from his wand. They slammed into my shield one after the other, the second bolt lifting me from my feet. I landed against a pillar with a grunt, sword and staff falling from my grasp. The shield shattered into sparks around me.

No, I thought, pawing for my weapons.

The skirt of the mage's black gown swished toward me. He spoke a Word. Vines broke through my mother's ashes in the floor cracks and climbed around me, binding me to the pillar. Before the cinching

tendrils could crush the air from my lungs, I drew in a breath.

"Resping—"

A vine wrapped my neck, choking off the Word. The Death Mage stopped in front of me. I raised my eyes to that awful gold mask with the empty eyes and the mouth set in a frown. The mage was holding his wand at shoulder level, ready to cast again. I struggled, but the vines were like steel cables, growing thicker. I knew how this would end. Any second, flames were going to burst around me. In my peripheral vision, I could see other black-robed figures drifting into the room to witness my execution.

At least I destroyed your damned book, I thought. *And when the Order gets their hands on you…*

But the Death Mage seemed to hesitate, head tilted to one side.

The vines had torn the robe of John the Baptist apart, and I was visible to him now. He turned and said something to the others, his voice taking on the gargling quality from earlier. A pair of mages came forward, one lifting my sword from the ground, the other my staff.

Marlow turned back to me. "Everson Cro—"

A bright fireball exploded against his side, blasting him across the room. The other mages let out choking sounds as their robes began to strangle them. I cut my eyes toward the sound of footsteps. My mentor was running toward me, corduroy jacket flapping at his back.

Chicory!

"I decided it would be easier to just come myself," he said in a pant. "And with the book destroyed…" He waved his wand, and the vines around me withered. I broke my arms free from the pillar and tore the tendril from around my neck. I then began to kick my legs free.

Meanwhile, Marlow had recovered and gained his feet. Chicory turned and hurled another fireball at him. Marlow repelled it with a slice of his wand, but a third Chicory fireball knocked him back with a grunt, flames flashing off his gold mask. Marlow's magic might have been powerful, but it was fading, and Chicory was throwing haymakers.

I struggled to break the last of the vines from my legs so I could help him.

Marlow incanted quickly. Tendrils of dark magic writhed from his wand like tentacles and sprung out to encircle Chicory. The energy swallowed him, blacking out his light. Panic rose in my throat. But in a blinding flash of magic, Chicory blew the tentacles apart.

He and Marlow circled one another, wands raised.

"You won't defeat us," Marlow said.

"You've already lost," Chicory replied matter-of-factly.

Light and dark magic exploded from their wands in a savage exchange. The other magic-users were still struggling against their throttling robes with both hands. I spotted the one who had taken my sword. White hair spilled down either side of a moldy face. A woman?

The sword, fallen from her grasp, had landed beside her. As I scrambled toward it, the woman's robe released her neck, and she drew a ragged breath. Marlow must have broken the strangulation spell. I lunged for the sword, but the woman grabbed the handle first.

Crap.

She shouted something in her gargling tongue as she swung the blade toward me. I jumped away, but too slowly. A force blast numbed my right side and knocked me the length of the room. I landed on my back and skidded across the floor several more feet. When I came to a stop, I lifted my head. The woman was rushing Chicory from behind.

I stretched a hand toward her and shouted, *"Vigore!"*

But the energy that stormed through my prism died inside me, stolen by the magic-cleaving power of my own sword. The woman closed in on my mentor and drew back the blade.

"Chicory!" I cried.

But among the detonations of magic, he couldn't hear me. I recoiled as she drove the blade forward, my mind supplying the crunch of flesh and bone as the blade disappeared into his back.

That didn't just happen, I thought. *That* couldn't *have just happened.*

Chicory sagged, his wand clattering from his grasp. The blinding magic around him blinked out, and the room fell dim. The woman withdrew the sword, and I watched in horror as my mentor collapsed to the ground.

Chicory? I called through our rapport.

But the connection was severed, the pressure behind my eyes and inside my ears releasing like a dying breath. The Death Mage looked down at Chicory, then over at me. I imagined the smile behind his mask. The same smile he'd worn while watching my mother burn.

I stood slowly. "Think that's funny?"

The room wavered with odd colors, like the ones I'd seen in the dream of the forest. I took a drunken step forward. I would die too, but not before ripping the mask away and beating his grinning face to a pulp.

Marlow sent the Order her ashes in a trash bag, I remembered Chicory saying, referring to my mother.

"You think that's fucking funny?" I asked more loudly, breaking into a shambling run.

Marlow's frowning mask continued to watch me. The colors of the room grew more intense and discordant. They spiraled around,

making my head pound. I was no longer aware of the other magic-users, couldn't even see them. The room seemed to have been reduced to a crazy, spiraling tunnel, Marlow at its far end, but growing larger, getting closer.

"I'll show you funny," I promised.

The pounding swelled in my head. I staggered and willed myself upright again. I was going to reach him, dammit … was going to tear the mask away … was going to pound his…

And then Marlow was right in front of me, uttering something I couldn't understand.

With a clawed hand, I stretched for his gold mask and collapsed into blackness.

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I was in a dark forest, running for my life, but everywhere I turned, there were the black-robed creatures, their fish eyes staring, mouths opening and closing, scimitars slashing. Everything hurt. God, everything hurt, down to the marrow in my bones. But I had to keep running, had to find the place in the forest where Chicory would bring me back. Most of all, I had to escape the whispers.

Everson … erson … son.

Sweating and shaking, I doubled over and vomited up a green bile that seemed to come from a deep and evil pit inside me. I willed myself to stand and run, to push my way past the fungus-coated trees and festering pools where wretched things lived, past the jabbering, stabbing creatures, none of which seemed to end.

But every so often they *would* end, and I'd find myself in a clearing, and I would fall onto my back, succumbing to the pain and exhaustion. My mother would be speaking over me, wiping my face with a clean, cool cloth, while sun shone down through her hair, turning it a radiant white.

"Help me," I would mumble. "Help me to the place where I can go back."

She would only smile and continue to speak in what I realized was a chant as soft and melodic as a lullaby. But as the chant carried me into sleep, I would find myself back in the dark forest, running for my life, trying desperately to evade the evil creatures and the whispers.

Especially the whispers.

Everson…

I cracked open my swollen eyelids. I was on my back, tucked into a bed of white sheets. A light dew of sweat coated my body. When I swallowed, my stomach felt as tight as a stretched drum.

"Everson," the person repeated.

My head swam when I rotated it. A woman was rising from a chair to my left, the sunlight through a window behind her infusing her hair

with hazy white light. Morning light. I fought to think back.

The forest, the creatures…

No, that hadn't been real. I'd been dreaming. Or more accurately, nightmaring.

I strained to remember how I'd gotten here. The evil ceremony, Lich's book in flames, my confrontation with the Dark Mage. The horrible image of a blade—*my* blade—crunching through Chicory's back. And then my effort to reach the mage, to rip the mask from his face, only to fail, to fall.

Had I died? Had the experience in the forest been some kind of purgatory? Was this my… I squinted at the woman. …*mother?*

"You're awake," she said in a strong, maternal voice.

I peered around the small room. Walls of handsome stonework shone white up to a high ceiling. Colorful rugs covered the floor. *I'm not in the palace anymore, that's for damn sure.*

I looked back at the woman. "What is this place?" I croaked.

"It's an infirmary," she said.

"Infirmary?"

"We had to sedate you for several days while the poison was purged from your system."

Though fresh air breezed through the room's open windows, I picked up an odor of illness. I remembered the vomiting from the dream—or whatever that had been. *Poison,* she'd said. I struggled again to think back.

"What happened to the Death Mage? Those … those creatures. How did you get me out of there?"

"We'll answer all of your questions, but first you need to eat."

I watched her as she stepped from the sunlight and walked around the bed. Without the backdrop of light, her face aged, her cheekbones becoming more stark. The whiteness of her hair had not been an effect of the sunlight, I saw. This woman was older than my mother would have been.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"My name is Arianna." Moving with strength and grace, she arrived at a table on the other side of the bed and picked up a bowl with a spoon inside it. She was the woman I had seen in my feverish sleep. "I knew your mother," she said. "Can you sit?"

I pushed weakly with my arms and scooted up until I was sitting against the wooden headboard, dizzied by the effort and what the woman had just said. "Knew my mother? When?"

"Before you were born," she answered, handing me the bowl. Inside was a broth that held what looked like a suspension of grains and minced herbs. A rich scent drifted up when I stirred them, making my stomach quiver with hunger. "In fact, I helped deliver you."

I stopped stirring the broth. “What?”

“In this same room,” she said. “More than thirty years ago.”

I looked around as my mind crunched the numbers. If Marlow was my father and I was one year old when he killed my mother, I would have been born while my mother was infiltrating the…

“You’re a member of the Front,” I said coldly, setting the bowl back on the table.

Arianna’s white hair shifted as she straightened. I gauged the length. It was the same hair as on the magic-user who had seized my sword and driven it through Chicory’s back. I incanted quickly while pushing myself out the other side of the bed. An invisible field blocked me.

“Yes,” Arianna admitted, “but the Front is not what you’ve been led to believe.”

Her voice propagated through the air in calming waves. *Whisperer magic,* I thought, recalling what Chicory had told me. *Making one see what isn’t there, believe what isn’t real.* I was still in the palace, then, magic worming through my mind, my senses. I stared around. The stone walls weren’t really as clean and white as they appeared, but oozing with black gunk, the air swirling with poisonous spores. I inhaled sharply, trying to catch a whiff of them. And this Arianna was no woman, but a mold-covered creature, the killer of my mentor.

“Vigore!” I shouted, thrusting a hand toward her.

A surprising charge erupted from my fingers only to slam into a cocoon of energy around the bed. The transparent shield shuddered as it absorbed the blast. When the shield stilled, Arianna remained where she had been.

“I know this is confusing,” she said, no hint of scorn or menace in her voice.

I hammered the shield several times until my arms tired and then tried to break through with another force invocation. The shield felt even stronger than the last time, powerful magic maintaining it. I sagged back against the bed, my body trembling, hair matted with sweat.

Arianna, who had looked on compassionately while I struggled, said, “We didn’t expect you to understand. Not right away. Your confinement is only temporary. We’re going to explain everything.”

A soothing breeze blew through the windows and washed over me.

An illusion, I had to remind myself. *All one big goddamned illusion.*

“There’s nothing to explain,” I said. “You’re a clan of sickos and murderers. But guess what? Your book’s history. If Chicory got through, so can the Elders. It’s just a matter of time.”

“There are no more Elders,” a man’s voice said.

I turned toward the lean figure striding into the room. He looked

to be late middle aged, strands of silver streaking through his dark, shoulder-length hair. He took a position beside Arianna. Intelligent gray eyes looked down from a handsome face etched with faint scars.

"There is no Order," he finished.

"Keep telling yourself that," I scoffed.

"Where are they, then?" he asked, looking around. "It's been almost five days since your battle with Marlow." Arianna whispered something to him, but he showed a staying hand, his gaze remaining fixed on mine. "Hmm?"

I incanted quietly, building up my prism, my capacity. I didn't know how long I'd been out, but my mind had clearly been screwed with. That's what the feverish dreams had been about—not detoxing, as Arianna claimed, but being poisoned by Whisperer magic.

"Rivelare," I whispered, attempting to disrupt the veil, to peer past it to the black rot and evil from earlier. But everything remained horrifyingly pristine. Through the open windows, birds tittered merrily.

"Ask yourself this," the man said. "Have you ever seen a representative of the Order?"

I stared at the ceiling. *Don't listen to him.*

"Sure, there was Lazlo, your first mentor," he said. "And Chicory. But other than those two? Well, how about a fellow magic-user, then? An organization that goes back several millennia, vast, branching lineages—it seems you would have been introduced to at least one or two others, no?"

"They're out there," I said defiantly.

"But the Order keeps everyone compartmentalized, is that it?"

"Connell, he needs to rest," Arianna said.

"Naturally," the man replied. "But I want to leave him with something to consider. Assume for a moment, Everson, that everything to this point in your wizard's life was an illusion and that *this* is the reality. Assume that we're not the enemy, but the ally. Assume that the Front isn't opposing the Order, but fighting in its memory. Assume that our goal was never to call the Whisperer into the world, but to strain with the last fibers of our magic to keep it out."

I remained staring at the ceiling, trying to bar his words from my mind.

"Assume for a moment that your mother was helping us," he said, "and was killed for doing so. See if that doesn't make more sense than what you've been led to believe."

I turned enough to glare at him. "Don't you dare mention my mother."

Connell watched me intently for another moment, then turned and

strode from the room. Arianna remained standing over the bed, head tilted. She seemed to be struggling with what to say.

"Call out if you need anything," she said at last.

Then she too departed.

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When Arianna's footsteps receded, I felt the cocoon-like shield around me expand to the walls of the room. My head swam as I threw my legs over the side of the bed. The expenditure of energy in my attempt to break through the shield earlier had left me weak. Being down for five days didn't help.

I sat for a moment, my gaze edging over to the bowl of broth on the bedside table. I lifted the bowl and brought it to my nose, its rich smell making my stomach quiver again. But I couldn't trust it.

It's something vile, I decided, setting the bowl back down.

When I pushed myself to my feet, the ends of a gown I was wearing fell to my knees. My shins looked thin and pale. I checked my chest, not surprised to find my coin pendant missing. My cane wasn't anywhere to be seen either. Ditto Grandpa's ring. I walked, using the wall for support—a wall of clean, solid stone—until I arrived at the window Arianna had been sitting beside earlier.

Squinting against the sun, I peered past the energy field and out into the world.

The courtyards inside the palace wall were handsome. The wind-blown plain below shimmered golden. The forest that ringed it appeared lush. I peered more closely at the plain. It was being patrolled, but not by wargs. The creatures looked like … common mastiffs?

I grunted. The illusion was impressive, I'd give them that.

I completed a circuit around the room, which included a small corner bathroom. The room's other window as well as the door were covered by the shield—a defensive system I lacked the power to break through. I made my way back to the bed and sat, disturbed by how exhausted the short tour had left me. I leaned forward, hands dangling between my knees.

What was I doing alive? Why hadn't the Death Mage killed me?

Because the Whisperer wants to use you, I answered, remembering what Chicory had said. *And that's what this is—one big mind fuck to get you to believe that they're the good guys.*

I peered around, considering the magic at work. Just as powerful as my mentor had warned me it would be. But though the Front could

make me see, hear, and smell whatever they wanted, I still had my beliefs. I would be damned if I was going to let them crack those open.

The first step to resisting them would be knowing the Front's strategy. I began cycling through Connell's suggestions. My original impulse had been to block them out, but I needed to analyze his words, get a better grasp on how the Front would try to influence me.

There are no more Elders, he'd said. *There is no Order.*

They were trying to chisel cracks in the foundation on which my concepts of wizarding and my role in it were based. They were trying to challenge my identity.

My thoughts turned to Connell's questions. Who had I encountered in the Order besides Lazlo and Chicory? The answer was no one, but so what? That was how the Order operated. Absent more often than they were present, taking forever to respond to correspondences—or ignoring them all together—giving confusing directives. It wasn't like I didn't have my marching orders, and I'd been reprimanded more times than I could count. If there was no Order, then who in the hell was doing the threatening and punishing?

Assume for a moment that everything to this point in your life was an illusion and that this *is the reality*, Connell had said. *Assume that we're not the enemy, but the ally. Assume that the Front isn't opposing the Order, but fighting in its memory.*

More attempts to undermine my identity, only now planting the seeds of a replacement identity, one that included the Front and whatever the Whisperer had them working toward.

And finally, the coup de grace:

Assume for a moment that your mother was helping us.

Bringing family into it, making it personal.

Taken together, the Front's strategy was to merge my identity with theirs. *Join us. Join the cluster. Become one.* I wouldn't let it happen. Would they resort to torture? A mind flaying?

Hopefully the cavalry would show up before then.

I caught myself listening for them, but all I could hear was bird song. My fingers began to fidget with the hem of my robe. It *was* strange no one from the Order had come. But knowing how absentminded Chicory could be, he might have neglected to tell them that I had crossed into the Refuge. I mean, the guy almost forgot to cast a bonding spell before sending me in.

"The Order knew he was preparing to send me," I said quietly, urgently. "I'm here at their mandate, after all. If it's been five days, they'll know he's fallen off the map. Will probably send someone to the safe house to check on him, someone who will talk to Tabitha, see the circle in the basement, put it all together." I stopped to listen again. "Help will be here soon."

Unless there is no Order, an insidious voice in my head whispered back.

"They'll come," I insisted, my fingers ditching the hem and digging at one another. "It's just a question of when."

Days? I wondered. *Weeks?* I could attempt to escape, but getting out of the room and palace weren't the issues. Getting out of the Refuge was, and that required advanced magic. Meaning I needed to figure out a way to send a message to the Order, something that would spur them to act *now*.

A grumble from my stomach interrupted my thoughts.

I eyed the bowl of broth again.

I DIDN'T SEE Arianna or Connell for the rest of that day or the next. Instead, I was tended to by a pair of what appeared to be automatons. Young men and women who looked part mannequin, part robot. They were pleasant in appearance and manner, leaving me to guess at their true monstrous forms. Probably something similar to the two creatures I'd slain with my sword.

I ate the broth they brought up and drank the water. If I hoped to recover my strength, I had no choice, I'd decided. And after each meal, I *did* feel stronger—which bothered me more than anything Connell might have told me. Probably the point.

By late the second day, I was strong enough to pace the room without frequent rests. I thought as I paced, still concerned by the absence of the Order. It had been a week now.

My direct line to the Order is a flame, I thought. *That flame is held in a silver cup, fed by an oil crystal, and linked to the Order's … switchboard, I guess you'd call it, through an incantation. So, material wise, I need a silver cup, an oil crystal, something to write on, and something to write with.*

The last two would be easy. I was given a cloth napkin with each meal, and blood pricked from my finger would make a passable ink. It would just be a matter of smearing out the message and then folding and waving the cloth over the flame. Producing that flame would be another matter, though. Oil crystals were hard enough to find in the city, and the cup I was being served water in was some sort of brass alloy, not even close to silver.

Would substitutes work?

From the way Chicory had explained it, the combination of silver and the incantation I'd been given were my connection to the Order. Anything else, and the message would end up in a different dimension, or more likely as a pile of ashes in this one. Back in my

library, my shelves held several books on alchemy, but little good they did me here. I blew out a hard sigh.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," a man's voice said from behind me. "We've come to change your bedding."

I turned to find two of the automatons, a young man and woman, entering, sheets and fresh pillows in their arms.

"Oh, sure," I said absently. "Thanks."

They nodded and went about their work. I watched them strip the bed, reflecting on how I'd uttered the thanks on instinct. Assuming the two *were* automatons, they were hardly sentient. I could have told them to piss off and cracked my chair over their heads, and they would have simply left, not phased in the least. But everything from their blinking eyes, to their subtle gestures, to the way they stooped to their work was all so convincingly human that I couldn't divorce myself from the social norms that had compelled me to thank them. And to think that they were products of someone's thoughts.

I stopped. *Of course.*

I let out a choked laugh, prompting the automatons to glance over. Fresh energy surged through me. I hadn't been thinking. The Refuge, brought into being by the Elders a thousand years ago, was the product of thoughts. As an ideational realm, thoughts here had special manifesting powers.

I didn't possess Elder-level magic, no, but I wasn't talking about thinking a *world* into being. I only needed a cup and a crystal. Though I'd never manifested matter before, I had performed projection spells —taking something solid and projecting its likeness somewhere else.

I was betting that here the same process would work with thoughts.

I waited for the automatons to leave, then waited a little longer to ensure no one else was coming. As the sky darkened outside the windows, revealing the realm's two moons, I left the room's lamp off. I climbed into bed, rolled onto my side, and pulled the covers over my head.

"Oscurare," I whispered, deepening the darkness around me.

Certain I was as concealed as I could be, I pictured the silver cup from my apartment, rotating it into a three-dimensional model in my mental prism. *"Imitare,"* I chanted. *"Imitare."*

Energy coursed around the prism, seeming to harden the thought into something independent of my mind.

"Liberare," I said, and released the thought.

The energy around my prism rushed out of me, and the image of the cup disappeared. I was sure the attempt had failed, when a moment later something cold rolled against my forehead. I worked my hands up into the pocket in front of my face until I was holding a

metal cup. I brought it to my nose and sniffed.

Silver.

Holy crap, it worked.

I repeated the ritual for the crystal, manifesting the thought and then releasing it. Something pinged into the cup. I reached inside and rolled the oil crystal between my fingers. *Okay,* I thought hiding the cup and crystal beneath a pillow, *now for the message.* I extended an arm and pawed for the cloth napkin on the bedside table, then stopped myself.

If I could manifest the other items, why not the message?

Gathering energy to my prism, I composed the message, as though giving dictation. I found myself using the formal system the Order required, a case of an old habit dying hard, but I was also worried that if I didn't defer to the Order's specifications, the message would be tossed.

To the Esteemed Order of Magi and Magical Beings,

Re: Imprisoned in the Refuge/Chicory Dead

Urgency: Ultrahigh

Pursuant to your mandate, Chicory sent me to the Refuge about one week ago tonight to find and destroy Lich's book. I succeeded in the task; however, in attempting to retrieve me, Chicory was slain. I am now a prisoner of Marlow and the Front, a group intent on subverting my will and magic to the Whisperer's malevolent ends. I urgently request your help.

Humbly Submitted,
Everson Croft

I repeated the ridiculous message in my mind, imagining it handwritten on a sheet of parchment paper in lampblack ink. When the thought hardened in my prism, I released it with another *"Liberare."*

The parchment settled in front of me. I took it and blew across the wet ink. Then, as casually as I could, I drew the sheets back, placed the cup with the crystal on the bedside table, and sat up.

"Fuoco," I whispered, my heart pounding through the Word. I was sure that any second, someone was going to come through the door, banish my creations, and prevent me from conjuring others.

The oil in the center of the crystal glowed, then jetted into a bright flame. It sputtered and smoked, as if on the verge of going out, before

shifting into a familiar plum-colored column, where it steadied. I pumped a fist. My magic was almost spent, but the thought items were doing their jobs. I reread the message and folded the parchment into a six-sided disk.

"Consegnare," I said, waving the disk over the flame, my eyes cutting to the door and back. *"Consegnare."*

The report began to smoke. *C'mon, c'mon, c'mon,* I thought, then jerked back as a bright flash tore the report from my fingers. I leaned forward again slowly, riveted on the flame. It cycled through the color spectrum, becoming orange, before returning to its original plum color.

I let out my breath in a long, shuddering sigh.

The message had gone through.

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"It looks like you've recovered."

When I raised my head, sleep seemed to run off it like thick water. Morning light filled the room. Connell was standing at the foot of my bed. I followed his gaze to the bedside table. Beside a fresh pitcher of water, the plum-colored flame continued to burn from the silver cup.

Fear shot through me. After sending the message last night, I'd closed my eyes, planning to rest just long enough to recharge my powers and manifest a weapon for protection. Instead, I'd fallen into a deep sleep, the manifestations having drained me much more than I'd thought.

Connell dragged the chair to the foot of the bed and sat so he was facing me. He nodded toward the cup. "It's why the Front chose this place," he said. "Its responsiveness to thought magic. The defenses the Elders created were superior to anything we could have manifested on the material plane or by our own magic. Through collective thought, we've maintained the Refuge."

"Until now," I shot back.

He nodded grimly. "That was an Elder book you incinerated. And yes, it contained powerful symbols that cannot be replicated, symbols instrumental in countering Lich's efforts."

"Nice try, but I saw the book."

"You saw what someone wanted you to see."

"Give it a rest. Lich was destroyed centuries ago." I sat up on the side of the bed, emboldened by the knowledge that the Order had received the message, that they were on the way.

"I assure you," Connell said, "Lich is alive and well."

"Then where is he?"

"I'm going to tell you everything."

"Your version of everything?" I snorted. "Don't bother."

"You've been conditioned to distrust us, and I accept that." His gaze cut over to the plum-colored flame. "But what I'm going to tell you will explain why no one's coming to your rescue."

I shook my head even as a ganglion of fear formed in my gut.

"And when I finish—"

"Yeah, yeah," I interrupted, "I'm going to throw my arms around

you and thank you for showing me the light."

"When I finish," he repeated patiently, "we'll release you."

I felt the sarcastic retort I'd been preparing fall away. "Come again?"

"Return you through the portal you entered by."

"And I'll be back in New York?"

"New Jersey, technically. But yes."

I stared at him. "Why?"

"Because we know the only way you'll accept the truth is by investigating it for yourself."

"Why is that so important to you?"

"If you'll let me begin…"

I looked around the room, searching for an anomaly, just one. I knew what I'd seen when I arrived at the Refuge, dammit. Mold-coated walls, fish-faced creatures, a summoning ceremony fit for the seventh circle of hell. My perceptions had only changed once the Front knocked me out for five days. And Chicory had warned me their mind-warping magic was potent. I mean, hell, it had turned the Elders against one another, almost toppled them. I had resisted thus far, but would listening to Connell's account endanger that?

"You'll send me back as soon as you're done?" I asked.

"We'll give you time to change into some clothes, of course."

I bristled at his attempted humor. "And if I don't investigate your claims you'll, what, pull me back here?"

"We don't have that kind of power, Everson. We can pull, but you would have to push. You'd have to be willing, in other words. But it's a moot point. You'll want to investigate."

I didn't like his self-assuredness. But for a chance to be sent back, especially if the Order was slow on the uptake… I snuck a peek at the plum-colored flame that didn't seem to concern Connell. I would keep an iron-clad hold on my skepticism, I decided. The second I felt my mind starting to bend, I would block out what he was saying and re-center myself.

"Fine. Tell me."

Connell nodded. "I received a similar training to yours. We all did. You know the story of the First Saints, Michael's nine children, how the Order came to be. That much of our history is true. You also heard the account of the rebellion in which Lich tried to overthrow his siblings."

Not wanting to give Connell a finger hold in my thoughts, I simply looked back at him.

"Lich made a pact with an ancient being called Dhuul. Chaos itself. In exchange for the power he felt he'd been denied, Lich sacrificed his soul to Dhuul and pledged to help him into our world. By his very

nature, Dhuul reduces systems of order to darkness and madness."

Chicory hadn't told me that part of the story. *Because it's a lie,* I reminded myself.

"So, yes, Lich did die, but not at the hands of the Elders. He rose as an undead being, a demigod, in full possession of Whisperer magic. And with that magic, he slaughtered his eight siblings."

"Bullshit," I said, unable to help myself.

He ignored the remark. "No more Elders. No more Order."

"Then who in the hell have I been working under for the last ten years?"

"Lich," Connell said. "After destroying the Elders, he used the same magic to create the illusion that the First Order continued to exist. Then, assuming various guises, he murdered the representatives of the Second Order, those with direct access to the Elders. From there, the Elders existed in name and legend only, a legend Lich could manipulate to his, and Dhuul's, ends."

"So you're saying that all of the creatures I've captured and sent back were illusions?" I fingered the place where a nether creature had torn off a chunk of my right earlobe.

"No, Everson. The work of everyone who served under what we believed to be the Order was very real. Beings do exist in the nether realms, the lesser ones seeking sustenance in our world, the greater ones hungering for dominion. Much of the critical work of the Order actually continued."

"And that helps Lich how?" I asked skeptically.

"In two ways." Connell stood and began pacing the room, hands clasped behind his back. Something in the way he carried himself bothered me. "First, it acts as a distraction, keeping magic-users like us busy. We don't question what we're being told to do, nor by whom. That has given Lich freedom to devote himself to building the portal between our world and Dhuul's. Second, the practice and experience we obtain grow our power. And—"

"That doesn't make any goddamned sense," I interrupted. "Why would Lich want magic-users to become powerful enough to challenge him?"

"Oh, they never get to that point. He only lets them grow powerful enough to sacrifice them. The lion's share of their power goes to the portal while a quotient is entrapped in a glass pendant that sustains Lich himself."

I blew a raspberry with my lips. "Like other magic-users aren't going to know their colleagues are suddenly missing."

"Even under the policy of compartmentalization?" he asked, one eyebrow raised. "And let's not forget the zero-tolerance policy. Magic-users are hit with enough warnings and threats in their early years

that were any of them to learn about the execution of a fellow magic-user—or told they were up for execution themselves—they would hardly be surprised. Terrified, yes, but not surprised."

I couldn't keep myself from revisiting the numerous warnings I'd received over the years. But that didn't explain Grandpa, an old and powerful mage. His death had been an accident, stepping into a street at the same moment a bee happened to sting an approaching driver. He hadn't been sacrificed or had his soul harvested.

I was going to say as much, then remembered something the vampire Arnaud had told me shortly before I blew him apart. *I kept close tabs on your grandfather since his arrival in Manhattan*, he'd said. *He was behaving quite curiously, performing work far beneath his station. A stage magician and insurance man?*

Almost as though Grandpa was trying to hide his abilities from someone. I broke off the thought when I realized Connell was watching me intently.

"Yeah, nice story so far," I said. "There's only one problem. If Lich the Great and Terrible created this perfect artifice, fooling everyone, how in the hell do you know about it?"

"Your grandfather," he said.

I stiffened. "What about him?"

"Asmus Croft was a scholar in Europe, a brilliant man."

"A scholar?" I'd never heard anything about that.

"Yes, of mythology. Interesting how you followed in his footsteps without ever knowing. In any case, in his early days as a wizard, Asmus took a great interest in the history of the Order. He learned everything he could about it, going back to the earliest records. That had been Lich's role in the First Order: penning its history and protocols, its first spell books. After overthrowing the Order, Lich took many guises, but he kept up the history. He gave an account of the rebellion, and his own role in it, but reported that it ended in his death and the closing of the seam to Dhuul. The falsehood was not only to evade suspicion, but to enact harsher punishment for magic-users who committed any number of infractions. Lich set up wards to spy on them. Thus began the regime of warnings and executions."

That was actually consistent with what Chicory had told me about the Elders taking steps to ensure nothing like the rebellion would happen again. *Careful, Everson,* I warned myself. *Probably exactly how Whisperer magic works, grafting lies onto what one already accepts as truth.*

"But Asmus was exceptional in languages too," Connell continued. "He developed an expertise in what would later become the field of linguistics. Though Lich had altered his penmanship in composing the post-rebellion history, your grandfather saw similarities in the diction

between that history and what had come before. He began to ask questions. Not aloud, no—he knew better. The questions he posed were to himself: What if the rebellion had succeeded? What if Lich had destroyed his siblings and not vice versa? What if this Dhuul was directing what everyone believed to be the Order? With those questions in mind, your grandfather simply observed. What was said, what was done, what was promulgated down the ranks. He did this for many years, continuing his work as a scholar and wizard, never letting on what he suspected but becoming more and more convinced of it. When the regional enforcers of the Inquisition grew bolder in their threats against European magic-users, he requested guidance from the Order, and this was where Lich slipped up."

I caught myself leaning forward slightly and sat back.

"The Order advised your grandfather to ally with the vampires to confront the threat," he said.

"What was wrong with that?"

"It went against the Order's entire reason for being," Connell replied. "Saint Michael sired children to combat the offspring of the Demon Lords, which included vampires. For hundreds of years, the Order had never wavered from that position."

"Yeah, but this was for survival."

"Saint Michael forbade his children from warring against humans. Again, it went against their reason for being. But now, just like that, two of the central tenets on which the Order was founded had been altered."

"How would that have been advantageous to Lich?"

"Your grandfather believed Lich saw war as the best chance for the long-term survival of magic-users. The longer they lived, the more powerful they grew, and the more of that power Lich could channel into his portal. Thus, the more powerful he would become."

"Then why did my grandfather fight?"

"He saw the fog of wartime as an opportunity to meet with other magic-users in secret. That was how he met Marlow. They compared stories on their experiences. Both of the mentors who had inducted them into the Order had been put to death for one violation or another. Other magic-users shared similar accounts concerning their own mentors. It was there, during the war against the Inquisition, that your grandfather, Marlow, and several others formed a rebellion to defeat Lich. It would take time and resources. Lich had been building his portal for centuries, after all. Several magic-users faked their deaths during the Inquisition, Marlow among them. They came here, to the Refuge, where they discovered Elder books and began the work of stalling Lich's progress. Following the Inquisition, your grandfather feigned a serious head wound and claimed he'd lost much of his own

power. He requested and was granted a release from the Order. Lich had no more use for him. Keeping a low profile, your grandfather worked between worlds, gathering information and resources out there, supplying it to us here."

I thought about Arnaud's claim that Grandpa had stolen and stashed magical artifacts during the war. Connell's version of events seemed to fit that, but suspecting Whisperer magic, I pushed the thought away.

"His daughter eventually took over that role. Your mother."

"I don't want to hear anymore," I said, standing. His account was filling in too many gaps, and doing it too neatly. I could feel my mind beginning to bend to the logic, the magic.

"Are you sure?" Connell asked.

Two automatons entered the room, carrying the clothes I'd arrived in as well as towels and a basin of clean water. They set everything on the foot of my bed and departed silently.

"Tell me this," I said in challenge. "Since you know so much, how did I end up here?"

I stepped into my boxers and tossed away the gown.

"To answer that, I have to go back to your beginnings. You were born here, beyond Lich's and Dhuul's sight. Lich killed your mother without knowing who she was; your grandfather had seen to it that she never joined the Order. You were placed in your grandparents' care, and through veiling spells, they ensured Lich remained ignorant of your existence."

I pulled on my shirt. "I thought you said he was a god."

"A demigod," Connell corrected me. "And a distractible one, thankfully. Obsession with power does that to a mage. When you turned thirteen, you entered your grandfather's locked study."

I turned and looked at him. How did he know that?

"Asmus told us," he said, reading my expression. "And it concerned him greatly."

I remembered how Grandpa had pulled me from the closet that night and sliced my finger with the cane sword. I remembered the grave look that had come over his face when I told him how I'd entered, by uttering a Word of Power.

"In order to keep you from Lich's sight," Connell continued, "your grandfather suppressed your power with plans to train you in adulthood. That never happened, of course. When he died, there was nothing to hold back your power. It awakened and began to manifest once more. And it manifested of all places in Romania, in the domain of a Third Order magic-user."

Lazlo, I thought.

"He would have communicated with what he thought was the

Order. From there, Lich would have probed your magic and determined who you were—not just the grandson of the late Asmus Croft, but the son of Eve and Marlow. It became his plan to turn you against Marlow, since you would have access to him. But he had to wait until you were powerful enough. The vampire Arnaud sped up that plan by telling you about his encounter with your grandfather regarding your mother."

They killed her, he'd claimed Grandpa had said. Had Grandpa been talking about Lich and Dhuul? *No,* I thought firmly. *He meant the members of the Front. Stop listening to this man.*

I sat to tie my shoes.

"You began looking into your mother's death, sending inquiries to the Order. Lich became concerned when you attempted to contact a gatekeeper. He would have followed you to the mystic, Lady Bastet, and then killed her to keep you from discovering a truth he couldn't manipulate. He then arranged the scene in a way that would compel you to investigate, to believe Marlow was responsible. By taking the vial of blood you'd given the mystic, Lich indebted you to the *Order*." Connell air-quoted the word with his fingers. "He set you up for a punishment that would mean being sent here. Are you beginning to understand how the regime of warnings and threats work? The residue he left on the cats—"

"Led me to Marlow," I cut in defiantly.

"—led you to wherever Lich wanted you to go," he finished. "It was Lich who spoke through your cat, pretending to be Marlow. Only when you arrived here did he have the spell actually lead you to Marlow."

How in the hell did Connell know so many details? Had he drawn them from me during the five days I'd been out? Was he in my head now?

"We know these things because of your demon," he said.

"Thelonious?" I blurted out.

"No, he's not with you enough. I was referring to your cat."

I shook my head. "There's no way Tabitha is working for you."

"Of course not," Connell said with a chuckle, as though he knew her as well as I did. "Not willingly, anyway. Tabitha inhabits a cat's body, but she also resides in a shallow demonic plane. A plane we've been able to tap into. Most of what she sees and hears in your presence, we can access and decipher."

"Then how come you didn't know I was coming?" I challenged.

"The energy around the safe house had a scrambling effect. We could no longer interpret what we were picking up on Tabitha's plane. We didn't know you were being sent so soon."

I found another hole in Connell's account. "If I was so important to

Lich's plan, why has he allowed me to take on such dangerous work?" I was thinking of all the close calls I'd had over the years.

"*Did* he allow it?" Connell asked. "Consider the times you were ordered to stand down or that someone intervened directly on your behalf."

I thought about Chicory showing up to save me from the druids in Central Park. It was the same night he'd ordered me off the demon cases.

"The rest of the time," Connell said, preempting my next challenge, "you were aided by Whisperer magic. Coming up with a solution, often a lifesaving one, at just the right moment."

"That's called a luck quotient. All wizards have it."

"Is that what you were told?" Connell asked, the genuineness in his tone rankling me.

I rounded on him. "You're telling me there's no Order and that's why no one's coming. That's the argument you're going with, right? Fine. I can use it too. There's no Lich. Want to know how I know? Because I destroyed your book, and look…" I peered over both shoulders. "…no Lich."

I crossed my arms smugly. *Checkmate.*

"He already came," Connell said calmly.

"When I was out?"

"No, before."

"Before?"

"Everson," he said, looking at me gravely, "Chicory is Lich. It's one of his guises."

I uncrossed my arms, unsure now what to do with them. For a disorienting moment I was sitting beside Chicory in his car after the druid encounter. *The Order can seem like an abstraction sometimes,* he was saying, *but when it comes to their mandates, they're rather black and white. Trust me. I've had to take care of two wayward wizards this month already.*

I remembered how dark and mercenary my mentor's eyes had looked.

"Forget it," I said, shaking off the memory. "You're never going to convince me of that."

"My job isn't to convince you," Connell said. "It's to give you enough information so you can investigate the claims for yourself. *You* need to decide whether what I'm telling you is true."

"I know what I saw."

"You saw what he wanted you to see."

I was barely aware of my fingers massaging the spot where Chicory had mashed his thumb. I felt a ghost of the pressure that had manifested behind my eyes and deep in my ears.

“If this crap you’re telling me is true, why the hard sell?” I asked. “You killed him.”

“Destroyed his form,” he corrected me. “And only because he’d activated the powerful enchantment inside your blade. No, the being that is Lich can only be killed by destroying the glass pendant in which he stores his claimed souls. Naturally, he keeps the pendant hidden. His new body is forming beside it as we speak, coalescing from the magic within. He will be back soon.”

An involuntary shudder passed through me. “Are you done?”

“For now, yes.”

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I followed Connell and Arianna down the steep steps of the palace to where the rocky hill flattened to the plain. Arianna had returned everything to me, including my sword and staff, claiming to have purified them of Whisperer magic. I carried both in my hands and kept a charge of energy around my prism. Neither of my escorts seemed to mind, which bothered me.

When we arrived on the plain, Connell whistled and one of the mastiffs hustled over, tongue lolling. I looked the dog over carefully as it sniffed me and then trotted beside us, escorting us toward the forest. It wasn't acting like a warg, but that could be illusory too, I reminded myself.

"To avoid additional holes in our realm," Connell said, "we're sending you back the way you came through."

Or are you taking me into the forest to sacrifice me? I thought.

But they'd already had plenty of opportunities, and that bothered me, too.

Soon, the trees took us in. Not the dark, fungus-riddled trees I'd arrived through, but a healthy growth of what looked like oak and spruce. After several more minutes we arrived at a small clearing.

"Here," Connell said, stopping.

As I arrived at the center of the clearing, he and Arianna stepped back.

"Do you have any more questions?" he asked.

"No."

"I'm sure you've been wondering about your father," Arianna said. "He visited your bedside while you slept. He is anxious to meet you and for you to meet him, but only when that is what you desire."

I *had* been wondering about him, of course, but I didn't let it show on my face. The man had killed my mother. I'd seen it, experienced it. The horror stuck like barbs around my heart. Even so, Connell had done his job. He'd managed to plant enough doubt in my head that I had no choice but to investigate his claims. Try to figure out what in the hell was going on.

"Are we going to get this party on, or what?" I asked impatiently.

"There is one more thing," Connell said. "Once Lich reconstitutes

himself, he's going to come after you. Whether to seduce you anew or end you, I can't say. He got what he wanted by sending you here. The Elder book contained powerful magic to keep Dhuul from the world. Its destruction did not weaken our stronghold here so much as increase Dhuul's, and thus Lich's, power. Knowing you have spent time with us, Lich will see you as a threat."

"You have four days," Arianna said, "no more."

"And then, let me guess, I have to come back here, right?"

"If you want to live," Connell said bluntly. "You'll have no defenses against his magic out there."

"Why do you care?"

He looked at me for a moment. "Because you're one of us."

"So are all magic-users, if what you're saying is true. Why aren't you helping them?"

"We have no way to reach them," he said. "When Lich discovered us, he sealed us in. Though your arrival came with a cost, it also presents a new opportunity. We can't come and go, but *you* can."

Is that why they kept me alive? To use me as an agent against the Order?

"Just be open to whatever you find out there," Arianna said. "When you're ready, return to the portal on your side and we'll help transport you back here. Just remember. Four days."

"Don't hold your breath," I muttered.

She presented a small glass vial with a clear liquid inside. "Take this," she said. "The same magic that purged you is concentrated within. Should you find yourself beset, use it."

Sure, lady, I thought, but accepted it.

"Are you ready?" Connell asked me.

I gave a nod, and he and Arianna began an incantation. The mastiff, who had been sniffing around, dropped onto his haunches between them and gave a single, friendly bark.

A moment later, I was staring at complete blackness.

"Illuminare," I called in a panic.

The opal in my staff flickered and then cast an orb of white light. A dirt floor and empty space stretched out around me. Shadows shifted in the rafters overhead. I was back in the basement, standing in the casting circle Chicory had drawn days before. The Front had actually released me.

I stepped from the circle and found the staircase at the far end of the basement. Mounds of earth, where my mentor had manifested elementals during my training, stood on either side of me. I looked

back, half expecting to see Chicory, but a hollowness in my gut told me I was alone. I ascended the stairs quickly, emerging through the door beneath the staircase to the attic.

"Hello?" I called. "Chicory? Tabitha?"

The inside of the house creaked and clicked in the stifling heat of high noon. I made a tour of all the rooms, starting in the kitchen. Everything appeared as I'd left it, down to the dirty plates Chicory had deposited around the house, only now black flies picked over them. With Chicory's death, the protective energies that once shielded the house were gone.

"Tabitha," I called again.

"In here…"

The weak voice had come from under the sink. When I opened the cabinet doors, a pair of green eyes squinted at me from behind pipes whose rusty joints glistened with moisture.

"Tabitha? What are you doing in there?" I reached a hand inside and, curling it beneath her stomach, hefted her out. She had lost a few pounds. I set her on the kitchen table and examined her.

"I thought you left me," she said in her hurt voice. She plopped onto her side as though her legs were too weak to support her.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that."

"I couldn't get into the fridge and had to live off the spoiled crud Chicory left out. And then the water stopped running. After lapping up everything in the toilet, the only place I could find any water was on those disgusting pipes." She grimaced and smacked her mouth as though trying to rid it of the taste. "Where *were* you?"

I sat in a chair facing her. "Things didn't go exactly as planned."

She raised her head enough to look over a shoulder. "And Chicory?"

Chicory is Lich, I heard Connell telling me. "The night he went through the portal, did he say anything?" I asked.

"Oh, not now, darling. I'm starving and wretched."

"Please, just answer the question."

"He said he'd be back. Typical man."

"This is serious, Tabitha. I need you to think back. What were his *exact* words?"

"What do I look like, a stenographer?" My eyes must have looked as frighteningly intense as they felt because her own eyes cut to one side as though searching her memory. "He said you were in trouble and that he was going in to help. That he would come back with you soon."

"Anything else?"

"What happened down there, darling?"

"You and Chicory are close," I pressed. "Did anything about him

ever strike you as, I don't know, funny?"

"Besides his green shoes?"

"No, anything he said? Anything he did?"

"Well, his sudden interest in you struck me as odd. I tried to tell him you were hopeless."

I thought about that. Aside from the brief visits here and there, usually to issue a warning, Chicory was absent for months, sometimes years. And all of a sudden he's committed to training me? That did seem odd.

And it had all begun the day I'd brought my mother's hair to Lady Bastet to divine from. In fact, it was only hours after the mystic's murder that I'd come home to find Chicory sitting in my apartment. All consistent with what Connell had told me. Chicory claimed to have been sent by the Order with information about my mother, but he'd damned sure been interested in the gatekeeper I'd summoned to learn about her death.

And what did the gatekeeper say? he'd wanted to know.

But that wasn't evidence of anything. If the Order had sent Chicory, the timing could have been incidental. And he would have been interested in *any* summoning, given that it was forbidden.

I looked back at Tabitha. Through her, the Front had access to my words, my actions.

"Here," I said, getting up quickly and opening the fridge. I pulled out a bottle of milk and some leftover food, fixed a meal for Tabitha, and set the plates and bowl on the floor. She hopped down from the table, wasting no time plunging her face into the fat and protein she'd been unable to get to.

While she ate, I returned to the bedroom Chicory had been using as a laboratory. On one side, a table held different-sized beakers with dirty distillation tubes running between them. A disorganization of spell implements and spiral-bound notebooks lay in scattered piles. Inside the notebooks, I found scribblings on various spells, all of them benign as far as I could tell. Nothing to suggest Chicory was anything other than who he'd appeared to be.

I didn't sense any active magic either, but I spoke a reveal invocation anyway. Nothing new appeared. I glanced over a pile of newspaper clippings on the table, the topmost one about the robe of John the Baptist being on exhibit at Grace Cathedral. Chicory had once remarked that, in addition to his mentoring duties, he kept track of magical artifacts. The clippings two and three down, on similar exhibits around the country, seemed to confirm that.

I moved a chair—over the back of which he had draped a row of wool stockings—and picked up a pair of manila folders that must have slid off the seat and landed under the table.

On one of the folder's tabs, I read my name.

Heart thumping, I retrieved the files and opened mine. Was this where I would discover the truth? Inside was a thin stack of pages secured by a pair of metal brads. I read through the pages, which contained notes on Chicory's handful of visits, including the warnings he'd issued. A line at the bottom of his final entry read, "Shows significant promise but requires more guidance to get there."

Sounds like Chicory, I thought.

The other file, considerably thicker, was labeled "James Wesson." Another magic-user? I opened the file, but other than the name I could find no identifying features. Just a much longer scribbled list of infractions, ranging from dereliction of duty to substance abuse.

And here I thought I *was the black sheep.*

But more important than what the notes said about James was what it said about Chicory. Like the messy room I was standing in, the notes appeared consistent with an advanced, though absentminded, wizard.

A dead wizard, I thought, picking up a gold cup from the floor: Chicory's former communication system to the Order. An oil crystal clinked around its bottom, but no flame rose from it now.

My throat tightened with grief as I remembered his death. His murder.

Then why did no one from the Order come? a voice prodded inside my head.

That was what was nagging me more than anything. Chicory had gotten through, after all. If the mission had been as important as he'd claimed, if I'd been sent by the Order, why hadn't others followed? Why had no one responded to my message? Where were they now?

"Goddammit," I whispered, hating the growing tangle of doubt I felt.

I set the cup back atop the table and searched the rest of the house. In the attic, I found an open trunk with the various wands, weapons, and artifacts Arnaud had kept in his armory and that I had passed on to Chicory. By all appearances, Chicory had given them a quick cleaning, then dumped them here. I sealed the trunk with a locking spell and moved on, checking the walls and panels for loose boards, calling out reveal invocations at intervals. But nothing appeared or stood out as unusual, in the attic or the rest of the house.

I arrived back in the guest bedroom to find Tabitha conked out on her ottoman. I shook her awake.

"What?" she complained.

"We need to talk."

"Can't it wait?" She flopped onto her other side so she was facing away from me.

“Chicory is dead,” I said.

She twisted her neck around and blinked twice. “Dead?”

Or undead, depending on who you talk to, I thought. But with the Front monitoring me, I didn’t want to show the slightest wavering. Better to keep my doubts a secret, deny Connell and Arianna anything they could use to manipulate me. I didn’t believe they were trapped in the Refuge as they’d claimed. If they could watch me, they could reach me.

“When Chicory came to bring me back,” I told Tabitha, “he battled the Dark Mage. Chicory was winning, but one of the mage’s minions snuck up and ran him through with my sword.”

“Well then how did you make it back alive?” she asked, her voice bordering on accusing.

“They released me.”

“Why?” she asked.

“To, ah, warn other magic-users not to mess with the Dark Mage,” I lied.

I no longer saw Tabitha’s eyes as eyes, but as peepholes. She narrowed them at me in suspicion. *Can they see me right now?* I wondered.

“Look,” I said, “we just need to get out of here.”

“Now?”

I stood and began gathering my clothes. “The house’s defenses are down. We’re not safe here anymore.” *And whose house is it anyway?* a part of me wondered as I stuffed everything into the large duffel bag I’d brought.

“The defenses are down? You mean I could have just strolled out of here and fed on male souls?”

“I’ll contact the Order when we get back to the apartment,” I said, hurriedly throwing my books into the bag and mashing everything down to pull the zipper. I was anxious to be behind my own defenses. “We can pick up some fresh goat’s milk and tuna steaks on the way.”

Tabitha stood and arched her back until several vertebra cracked. “First sensible thing you’ve said since you returned.”

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Chicory had parked his compact car in the small garage attached to the house. Though I hadn't been able to find any keys in the house, a quick search of his cluttered glove compartment turned up a spare.

I opened the trunk to stow my duffel bag, but the space was too jammed with boxes. Several more rows filled his back seat, the files they held like the ones I'd found in Chicory's room. Names of whom I assumed were magic-users, along with scribbled notes. The files looked less like the work of a demigod than an overburdened social worker. But they might be a start.

I shoved my duffel bag atop the boxes in the back seat and opened the passenger side door for Tabitha. As she climbed in, I took a final look at the door to the house. *When you're ready, return to the portal,* Arianna had said. I had scoffed, but *would* I be returning here?

"Can we go?" Tabitha said. "I haven't had any decent sleep in weeks."

The drive through the Lincoln Tunnel and down to the West Village was uneventful. I arrived at the apartment to find the door triple-bolted, the wards intact, and the inside of the unit as I'd left it. A quick scan revealed no signs of intrusion. Tabitha trotted past me and hopped onto her divan. She let out a contented sigh as she curled into her sleeping position.

I dropped my duffel bag and checked my voicemail. No messages.

Good.

According to Arianna, I had four days until Lich reconstituted his form. A narrow window, which might have been the point—to compel me to dive straight into the investigative work.

Instead, I climbed the ladder to my library/lab and glanced over my hologram of Manhattan. Though I'd been gone for two weeks, the hologram was dim. It had been Chicory's job to maintain the magic-detecting wards throughout the city. No Chicory probably meant no more wards, which meant no alarms. Another senior magic-user in the Order would have to restore them.

Assuming there are any left, the insidious voice inside my head whispered.

I pressed my lips together and turned to the plum-colored flame on

the table. No new messages. At my desk, I sat and penned an update to the Order. I waved it over the flame, the orange flare telling me the message had been received.

But is anyone even home? the voice taunted.

"Shut it," I said.

With a Word, I revealed my books, then pulled down a tome on potions. I flipped until I found the most powerful one for dispelling magic that I could reasonably cook. It would take the rest of the day to prepare the potion, and I wasn't even sure it would work against Whisperer magic, but I needed to try. I wouldn't get anywhere if I couldn't trust my own thoughts.

I pulled out my burner and pots and got to work.

THE NEXT MORNING, with the bitter dispel potion cramping my stomach, I drove Chicory's car downtown. At the checkpoint at One Police Plaza, guards examined my ID and waved me through. Detectives Vega and Hoffman were waiting for me in the front of the building, Hoffman holding the handle of a large, four-wheeled dolly.

"Great. You again," he said when I got out.

I grinned. "Admit it, Hoffman. You missed me."

"Yeah, like a leaking appendix."

"Are those the files?" Vega asked, nodding toward the back seat.

"Yeah, and there are some more back here," I said, unlocking and raising the trunk door.

While the potion had been cooking, I had called Vega and filled her in on my trip to the Refuge. She had agreed to take the files as evidence in the Lady Bastet murder investigation. I had also called Caroline, my former colleague and now a fae princess. At the very least, I'd wanted to find out what the fae knew about the Whisperer. But Caroline's old number was no longer in service and she hadn't been seen in the mayor's office in several days. Were the fae evacuating our world? I had considered going to the fae townhouse in the Upper East Side to find out, but I couldn't risk losing my magic again.

Vega gestured to Hoffman, who grumbled and began loading the boxes onto the dolly. She and I walked several paces away from the car until we were out of his earshot.

"Are you all right?" she asked, the skin between her eyebrows folding in.

"Yeah. I think so, anyway."

"So your father *didn't* kill your mother?"

"At this point, I honestly don't know. But either way, the same

person who killed her killed Lady Bastet. That much I can say with confidence. The murderer wanted to suppress the truth. Whatever that truth is," I added in a mumble, feeling just as confused as before I gagged down the potion.

"And the perp might be the person whose files we're taking in? This Chicory?" She jotted down his license plate number.

"There's a small chance," I said, hating that I was even considering it. "I appreciate you doing this, by the way."

"What are we looking for exactly?"

"The files contain info about other magic-users like me, maybe. I just need you to find out what you can about them, who they are, where they live, whether they knew Chicory, when they last saw him."

"There must be hundreds," she said, eyeing the growing pile of boxes on the dolly.

"Which is why I need all the help I can get." I remembered something I wanted to ask her. "Hey, last month when you and I were on the outs, didn't you say something about consulting another magic-user in the city?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, *that* guy."

"Do you happen to remember his name?"

"James Wesson."

A charge went through me. His name had been on the other folder in Chicory's room.

"I should still have his info," Vega said, pulling a wallet from her back pocket and flipping through a batch of business cards. "Here it is." She separated out the card and handed it to me.

The card stated his name and phone number, nothing else. "I'll give him a call," I said. "See if I can't stop in and talk to him myself."

"Have fun," she said dryly.

"Why? What's wrong with him?"

"You'll see."

"Where did you find him?"

"Yellow pages. He's listed under both 'Sorcerer' and 'Supernatural Consultant.'"

That sounded odd for a member of the Order. I'd always assumed those listings were posted by frauds. "Was he helpful?"

"You mean when he decided to do some actual work? Yeah, he came up with a few insights. Namely that the murder wasn't the work of werewolves, and magic had decapitated the cats."

I reread the card and put it away. "Sounds like he knows his stuff, anyway."

"Said he was going to run a test on the residue, but that was around the time you and I patched things up. I had the department cut

him a check and tell him his services were no longer needed."

I thought about how that could be my in, telling this James that I had taken over the consulting gig and wanted to compare notes. I could then introduce questions about the Order, see how much he knew.

"So are you back for good?" Vega asked.

"Only until tonight. There's a trip I need to take."

"Where?"

"Romania."

"Romania? What's over there?"

"It's where my first mentor trained me, someone named Lazlo."

"Wouldn't a phone call be easier?"

"He doesn't own one—or at least he didn't ten years ago. And I have no other way of reaching him. Lives a pretty solitary lifestyle." I thought about the farm outside the village where he'd taken me to train that summer. The old house, the barn, the muddy fields.

"Can you trust him?" Vega asked.

"The Front implied he wasn't part of the conspiracy. So, either there really is an Order and he belongs to it, or there isn't an Order and he *thinks* he belongs to it. Either way, he should be able to help me sort out what they told me. He's really powerful, and he knew my grandfather."

Besides that, he's the only other member of the Order I *know,* I thought.

"Here," she said, reaching into her pocket. She pulled out the pager I had used while consulting for her and placed it in my hand. It still had the iron case that protected the electronics from my aura. "I'll call if anything important comes up. Let me know if you find anything on your end."

"Will do."

"Oh, and if you want your bathrobe back, I pulled it from evidence."

"Huh?" I squinted at her before remembering the robe of John the Baptist. My bath robe, which Chicory had imbued with a veiling spell, would have been laid bare when Chicory was slain. "Oh, crap."

"Yeah," she said, crossing her arms. "The papers had a field day."

"I'll be happy to take it off your hands," I said sheepishly.

"I already stuck it in a package and dropped it in the mail. It should be at your place later today."

"I owe you," I said.

"Just keep me in the loop."

"I will."

"And Croft," she said, her eyes as stern as ever, "take care of yourself."

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I called James's number from a payphone and spoke to a young woman named Carla. He wasn't in, she said, not sounding especially happy about that fact. Probably why she volunteered the name of a bar where I could find him.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled up in front of the address, just beyond where the Upper East Side disintegrated into Spanish Harlem. I crossed the graffiti-tagged sidewalk, pulled the door open, and stepped into a drift of smoke. At first glance, the bar looked empty. I then realized everyone was gathered in a room off to the left, where I could hear the sharp clacking of billiard balls. As I entered the pool hall, I realized I should have asked Carla for a description.

In another moment, I realized I didn't need one.

Everyone was crowded around one table where a young black man in a battered bomber jacket and cowboy hat was cruising around the cushion, stroking in striped ball after striped ball, barely seeming to look at what he was doing. A membrane of silver magic moved around him.

"Eight ball, corner," he said, nodding at the far pocket.

Murmurs sounded from the audience of twenty or so. I rose onto my tiptoes and saw why. His opponent's solids were in the way. The shot was impossible. Lips barely moving, James slammed the cue ball into the edge of the eight ball, sending it in a spinning arc from the edge of the table, around the mass of solid balls, and into the pocket he'd indicated, dead center.

He just used an invocation, I thought in alarm.

Straightening, James adjusted his aviator sunglasses and grinned. "Game."

His opponent, a large man who had been watching with a constipated frown, removed a wad of bills from his pocket and slammed it on the table. As the loser stormed off, James coolly picked up his winnings and bounced it in his hand. Nodding as though he'd just calculated the dollar amount by its weight, he deposited the wad into a jacket pocket and looked around.

"Who's next?" he asked.

The other patrons peered at one another and gave dubious shakes

of their heads.

"I'll up it to twenty to one," he said. "Five hundred dollar minimum. I win, I get the five. You win, you walk with ten G's." A rubber-banded fold of hundreds appeared in his right hand, and he waggled it back and forth.

The chatter around the table got louder, but still no takers.

"What about you, lanky?"

I didn't realize he was talking to me until heads turned. The crowd stepped apart, creating a smoky aisle between me and the table. James stood on the table's other side, cue over one shoulder.

He was younger than he'd looked at first glance, about my height but muscular and with the kind of carved face and lips women loved. Though he couldn't have been older than twenty-three, twenty-four, I still couldn't get over the audacity of the guy. A member of the Order using magic to hustle? Then again, his file was thick with infractions.

I cleared my throat. "You're James Wesson, right?"

"What's this look like?" he asked. "A meet and greet?"

The crowd laughed, making my face burn with embarrassment.

"I'm actually here on NYPD business," I said, affecting an official tone. "I have a few questions I'd like to ask."

"Tough tits, porky. I'm working."

More laughter broke from the crowd. James chalked his cue and gave it a casual puff.

"This is serious," I said. "A matter of highest *order*."

I emphasized the last word, but if James caught the meaning, he gave no sign. Instead, he looked around as though he'd lost interest in me, just someone taking up space in his world. The crowd shouldered me back.

"Forty to one," he offered now.

Whistles sounded at what the winner stood to gain.

"I'll take those odds."

A riotous cheer went up as the attention turned back to me and enthusiastic hands ushered me toward the pool table. The grin on James's lips hardened as he sized me up. I'd whispered an invocation before accepting his challenge, hiding my wizard's aura. I assumed a look of defiance now, someone who had just been humiliated and was determined to get even.

James recovered his grin. "Let's see the green."

I pulled out my wallet, which I'd just loaded with cash for my trip, and held it open. He nodded and rolled the cue ball to one end of the table as two guys fished balls from pockets and racked them at the other. I was reaching for one of the mounted pool sticks when James said, "Don't bother. This'll be quick."

I now understood Vega's eye roll. The guy was an arrogant ass.

I lowered my arm and watched him break. More specifically, I watched his lips. With the help of a whispered incantation, he sunk three solids. He strode around the table and lined up his shot. Magic fluttered across the green felt. The cue ball split two solids, knocking them into opposite side pockets. He used another force invocation for his next shot, hopping the cue ball over one of my stripes, and nudging his target into a corner pocket. With one solid remaining, he banged it off three cushions before dropping it into another corner pocket.

The jeers started from the crowd.

"NYPD fixing to get his ass *run*!" someone shouted.

James circled the table, eyeing the eight ball in relation to my scatter of untouched stripes. Passing on a direct shot into a side pocket, he indicated the far corner and crouched over his stick. Like the final shot in the last game, it was a challenging angle with way too much traffic. James wasn't just playing for money. He was playing for reputation.

I was going to enjoy this.

James snapped the cue ball into the eight, sending it on another arcing circuit toward the corner. Without a pool stick to hold, I had tucked my cane nonchalantly beneath one arm. Now, standing behind the corner pocket, I angled the cane's tip down and whispered, *"Protezione."*

The shield that spread over the pocket was too thin to be visible, but too thick to allow the eight ball passage. Instead of sinking, the ball rattled around the edge of the pocket and popped out.

A collective "oooh" pushed from the crowd.

James straightened slowly, staring at the missed shot in disbelief. I switched my aim to the cue ball, which was still rolling idly, and changed its trajectory by a few degrees. It clunked into a corner pocket. Stepping forward, I clapped James's shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

"Tough break," I said.

For another moment, the crowd around the table remained entranced in a questioning silence. Then, like waters breaking a dam, they shouted and clamored at once. "Holy crap, he scratched!" "James just blew twenty G's!" It was clear they were delighting more in his loss than in my win. Their voices coalesced into a chant of "Pay up! Pay up! Pay up!"

With a tight grin, James pulled out two of the rubber-banded billfolds from his pocket and pressed them into my hand like we were shaking around them. But instead of releasing them, he clenched and drew me up against him. I could feel the hard breaths from his nostrils.

“What the fuck was that?” he whispered.

“An unlucky shot, apparently.”

“Who are you?”

“Someone who needs to talk to you. Now.”

He clenched my hand harder. “You cheated me.”

“Hey, man, I was only playing your game.”

James didn’t have an answer for that. The breaths cycling against my ear began to tremble in anger. I sensed him debating whether to hit me with an invocation, felt the charge building.

“Do it, and the gig’s up,” I warned. “Word will get out, I’ll make sure of it. I’m guessing there are more than a few stiffs who will come looking for their money. Maybe even a few in this crowd.”

The power around him ebbed. “I’m not telling you shit,” he whispered.

“Tell you what, take a walk with me, and maybe you can earn back what you lost.”

His breathing smoothed. His grip relaxed around my hand and his money. When we separated, he was grinning again. He shrugged at the crowd as though to say, *Win some, lose some.*

“Gonna take a little break.” He tossed his pool cue to another player.

The crowd broke apart and started their own games at the other tables. James strode from the pool hall ahead of me, leaving me to follow in his path. When he reached the bar, the bartender had a bottle of beer waiting for him. James grasped it wordlessly and turned toward the exit, taking a pull from the bottle as he shoved the door open with a leather boot.

We stepped out into the sun. James leaned against the building and took another pull, then let the bottle dangle at his side between a pair of hooked fingers. I couldn’t see his eyes beyond his sunglasses..

“You some kind of magic-user?” he finally asked.

“Just like you,” I said. “We belong to the same organization.”

“Never seen you before.”

“Seems to be how the Order likes it.”

James tipped the bottle to his lips again, face aimed at a boarded-up building across the street.

“Do you mind telling me how it all started for you,” I said.

“How all what started?”

“You know, discovering your abilities. Getting noticed by the Order. Your training. Your work.”

He pulled in his lips in thought. Despite the heat, he made no move to remove his leather jacket. Underneath, he wore a plain undershirt. A silver cross hung over his chest. His jeans were stonewashed, shredded at the knees. I knew the type: too cool for

school—and definitely too cool to answer to authority. But he was having to weigh that against the itch to get his money back. Blow me off, and he could kiss his twenty grand goodbye.

"I was in boarding school," he said at last. "St. Mary's, though we called it Catholic lock up."

"Your parents sent you?"

He shook his head. "Never had any."

Another magic user who'd grown up without a mom or dad. Orphan tales were a dime a dozen, apparently. *Either that,* the voice in my head whispered, *or Lich claimed them too.* James caught me looking at him. "I don't know their story, so don't bother asking."

"You were telling me about your boarding school?" I prompted.

"Yeah. Roomed with three other guys. We were sort of a pack." He gave a small snort of reverie. "Around the time we were in the eighth grade, Parker smuggled in a Ouija board. I didn't believe in that shit—I don't think any of us did—but to ruffle the priests' gowns, you know."

"Rebellion," I said.

"What can I say, we were little adrenaline junkies. You can only get caught smoking behind the chapel so many times before it's time to up the stakes."

I nodded as James took another swallow. He was beginning to loosen up.

"So, not really knowing what we were doing, we set up the board one night, lit some candles, put our fingers on that little plastic thingie."

"The planchette," I said.

"Yeah, whatever. At first we were just bullshitting. Will Mikey ever get laid?—crap like that. Then this feeling came over me, like I was being electrocuted. I went stiff, couldn't breathe. And then something talked through my mouth. 'Who's going to die next?' it asked. I remember the other guys laughing and tug-of-warring with the plastic thing, trying to spell out each other's names. But I couldn't move. I was suffocating. Felt like I was dying. All of a sudden, a force erupted through my fingers, and in three jerks, it spelled out a name: 'B-E-N.' And then I could breathe again. My buddies never noticed anything wrong. They were repeating the name to one another. Ben was this homely kid who lived down the hall. 'Bedwetting Ben' we called him, because, you know, he had that problem. The guys joked about him drowning in his own piss, but I was bothered, man. Had awful dreams that night, about leather belts and death. Next morning, the staff rousted us out of bed. We're going to an assembly, they said. As we filed out of the dormitory, I could see an ambulance and a pair of police cars. Didn't learn till that night they'd found Ben in the janitor's

closet. He'd cinched a belt around his neck and hung himself from the pipes."

A chill went through me. "What happened to you sounds like demonic possession."

"Ya think?" James took another sip from his bottle. "The demon hung around for a while. Didn't take the Ouija board to call it up, either. For the next year, the feelings would just come out of the blue. I'd say something and it would happen. Always bad shit, though. Another suicide later that year. A fire in the administration wing."

"So you developed precognition?"

"That's what *I* thought. But then I started remembering the dreams more clearly. The one with the fire, for example. Word got around that whoever the arsonist was had set it with hymn books. When I heard that, I suddenly remembered dreaming that I'd stolen some hymn books from the chapel and was setting them around the inside of an office. Putting them under curtains and around wooden bookshelves—the things that would catch quickest. The dream was the same night of the fire. Freaked me out so bad, I told one of the teachers about being possessed. Thought I could trust him, but he got me to tell him about the dream, and from there, he and the administrators wheedled a confession out of me for the fire. Even though I still couldn't say for sure whether I'd actually set it."

"No exorcism?" I asked.

"Naw, they didn't believe in the possession part. Guess that's what I got for being a delinquent. They called the police, and I was taken out in cuffs. Tried and convicted in juvie and sent to a pen upstate."

"Jesus," I said.

"Yeah, thank God I didn't say anything about the suicides, 'cause I had dreams about them too." He sent down another swallow of beer. "Anyway, there was this gang in juvie, group of guys who trashed the new kid as a matter of course. I was there about a week when my turn came. We were out in the yard, and they bum-rushed me. Knocked me down, started stomping me. Then that cold feeling came over me, and I shouted a foreign word I'd never heard before."

"A Word of Power," I said.

"Felt like a stack of TNT had gone off inside me. Next thing I knew, the guys were scattered over the yard. Faces bloodied, bones broken, a couple of them throwing up. I didn't know what the hell had happened, but the story got around. Guys steered clear of me after that."

I thought about how my first experience had happened around the same age. I'd been thirteen when I entered Grandpa's study by repeating a Word I'd heard him utter. He'd suppressed my magic, though, and it wasn't until I called up Thelonious a decade later that

the magic returned with a bang. James's latent magic must have been sparked by whatever took him over.

"About a month later, I was told I was being released into someone's care," he went on. "An older woman showed up, red hair, long white coat. Elsie was her name. She drove me to a Victorian house up in the Catskills. I just figured she was some strange broad who couldn't have kids of her own. I was looking forward to running roughshod over her, but that first night, she scared me straight. Hit me with a paralyzing bolt, then told me I was a magic born. She'd been sent to teach me how to use my gift. If I didn't do what she said, she would deplete my magic and send me back into the system. That's when I learned about the Order."

"How long did you stay with Elsie?"

"Till I was eighteen. So, five years."

"You got *five* years of training?" I'd only received a few months under Lazlo before returning to New York and being put under Chicory's mentorship—which hadn't amounted to much.

"Yeah, she taught me mental prisms, Words of Power, how to shape energy."

"What do you use as a conduit?" I asked out of curiosity.

James reached into his jacket and pulled out a metal wand. He twirled it over his first finger and thumb like a drummer before sticking it back in his pocket. "After that it was potions and spells, minor summonings. She took care of the demon, too."

An ember of envy burned in my gut. I'd had to learn those skills from books. And Thelonious was still bound to me.

"When I turned eighteen, she said I was ready. Set me up with a place in the city." He jerked his head. "Just north of here. Told me my new mentor would show up. After a couple of months I got tired of waiting, so I started putting what I'd learned into practice in pool halls and gambling houses. As you saw, the pay's decent."

"But someone showed up eventually," I said.

"Yeah, and said he wasn't happy about what I was doing."

"Chicory?" I asked.

James nodded. "He wanted me to focus on getting to amateur conjurers before the little creatures they called up could do any damage. He put me in charge of the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island. Gave me a map that would light up when something popped into our world. The work was all right, but sort of dead in between. Magic or not, I was gonna live my life."

So, he'd been given the same job as me, but in New York's outer boroughs. More compartmentalization. "You and Chicory butted heads, I take it," I said, remembering the infractions in his file.

"You could say that."

"Weren't you worried?"

He looked over at me, his face blank. "About what?"

"Oh, I don't know. The *penalties*."

"Oh, you mean the Big One?" He drew a finger across his neck and gave a lazy laugh. "Yeah, Chicory tried holding that crap over my head, but after a while it got old. I just nodded and went back to whatever I was doing. The guy only showed up once in a blue moon, anyway."

I thought about the terror I'd felt upon being issued the same threats: the loss of appetite, the hives that would break out over my chest, the sleepless nights. And here James had tuned them out like they were background static. I felt like I was talking to a much cooler version of myself. But what did it mean that the Order had never followed up on the warnings?

"What happened to your first trainer—Elsie?"

James shrugged. "Never heard from her again."

"You never went back to visit?"

"Never thought to. It wasn't like we were friends."

"What about Chicory? Did he ever, I don't know, say what he was up to when he was away?"

"Checking up on other magic-users, best I could tell."

I nodded. That had always been my assumption.

"You consulted for the NYPD last month," I said, changing course.

"Yeah, was running out of people to hustle. Figured it was time to do something legitimate. Something the Order would be more agreeable to. So I hung out a shingle. Was sorta surprised when the NYPD called."

"You told them Lady Bastet was killed by magic. How did you know that?"

"A reveal spell. The magic was hidden but it was there."

Same thing I'd used. "You were going to run a test on the residue," I said, "the stuff found on the mutilated cats. Did you get anywhere?"

"The NYPD had me turn in my hours before I got started. And if they weren't gonna pay me for it…" He swirled his beer, and took a foamy swallow. He was getting to the bottom of the bottle.

Before I could ask him anything more about the case, a young woman sauntered up. She was curvy and coffee skinned with a midriff shirt and purple eye shadow. "There you are, baby," she said to James, planting a lascivious kiss on his mouth, which he seemed more than happy to return.

I shifted my weight, pretending to become interested in the bent fender of Chicory's car. When James's and the young woman's faces separated, she pressed herself to his side and turned toward me.

"I'm, ah, Everson," I said, extending a hand. "We spoke earlier."

She squinted back at me, not moving her arm.

"Carla, right?" I prompted.

"Carla?" The young woman jerked from James and planted her fists on her hips. *"Carla?"* she repeated, this time with even more venom. "You're still running with that skank?" Before James could answer, she slapped him across the face and stormed back the way she'd come.

James straightened his sunglasses and rubbed his jaw. "Thanks, man."

"Not Carla?" I said.

"What the hell is all this about, anyway?"

I sensed his impatience, but it was a good question. Everything he had told me could be consistent with either the official story, that there was an Order, or the alternate version, that Lich had created a shadow Order and was manipulating magic-users to feed his efforts.

"Did you ever meet anyone higher up in the Order?" I asked.

"The money first."

"Money?" Then I remembered I still had his twenty thousand in my pocket. I drew out one of the rubber-banded bill folds and handed it to him. "I'll give you the other one when we're done."

"If you want an answer, you'll give it to me now. I'm tired of talking."

"Even for ten thousand?" I asked, holding the other wad back.

"Keep it," he said and turned away.

I needed answers more than he needed the money, and he knew it, dammit.

"All right," I said, my jaw tensing.

James turned back, accepted the money, and pocketed it. Then he tilted his beer to his mouth, draining the last of it. He reared his arm back and heaved the bottle across the street. I watched it shatter against the side of the vacant building, wondering why he'd done that. I turned back in time to catch a close-up of his knuckles before they plowed into my chin.

More stunned than hurt, I staggered back and drew my cane, but not before James had drawn his wand.

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Silver magic flashed from the end of James's wand and streaked toward me like lightning. I threw up my cane, forgetting that the magic-absorbing capacity of the staff had been cleaned. Voltage roared through me as the bolt struck and lifted me from my feet. I landed down the block, performing several backward somersaults before coming to a bruising rest.

I was surprised to find myself still holding the cane, the current apparently having locked my fingers around it.

"Protezione," I called as I staggered to my feet.

Energy coursed through my banged-up prism and emerged from the staff's orb, manifesting a shield. Sparks blew from it as another of James's bolts struck. The young wizard was pacing toward me, lips set in a determined line. The air around him glimmered with power.

"What the hell are you doing?" I shouted, drawing my sword.

He unleashed another attack, splitting the silver bolt in two. They arced around—much as he'd made the billiard balls do—and slammed into either side of my shield. My protection buckled. A clapping sound landed against my ears, as though they'd been hammered by a pair of open hands, the pain driving to the center of my head.

I stepped back, incanting to maintain my prism. My recent training with Chicory had increased my capacity to cast, but another couple of shots like that and I'd be toast. What was this about, though? The stupid pool game? Or was I dealing with something more sinister?

Need to put him on the defensive.

"Vigore!" I called, swiping my sword in a clumsy arc.

The force caught Chicory's car and heaved it toward James. With a Word, he manifested a silver light shield and used it to shove the car back into the street. Still backpedaling, I shouted another invocation, this time uprooting a section of chain-link fencing from an adjoining lot. With sharp clangs, the fence whipped around and encircled James.

"Respingere," he said.

His silver shield flashed, and the fence broke into pieces, his boots crunching over the broken links as he continued his advance. Thanks to his five years of training, the guy's magic was fundamentally sound. But I had experience on my side, not to mention a sword in which

some of Grandpa's magic-cleaving enchantment still lingered. I'd have to employ the first to get close enough to use the second, though.

"Illuminare," I called.

The light that pulsed from my shield was meant to blind him, but James had anticipated the Word and countered with a Word of his own, one that intercepted the light with an orb of darkness. Damn. That was the problem with casting in the same language as your opponent.

Two more bolts slammed into my shield, rocking me backward. When I grunted, a smile formed across James's lips. His confidence was growing. He cast his next bolt from the hip.

As my shield shook and sparks blew across my face, I remembered how James had passed on the easy tap into the side pocket for the win against me earlier, electing instead for a trick shot. Something told me he'd do the same thing out here: go for the spectacular instead of the sure bet.

Deciding to test that theory, I turned and ran.

Behind me, James spoke four Words in rapid succession. Bolts ripped past my shielded body, leaving harsh ozone trails in their wakes. Several blocks ahead they wheeled in different directions, like jets at an air show, before storming back toward me en masse. I didn't have to look over my shoulder to know James had thinned his shield to feed the bolts.

I aimed my sword back between my legs. Using a force blast as a propellant, I released my grip and let the sword rip.

Behind me, James let out a scream. The bolts fizzled in midair.

I turned to find his shield shattered, James clutching his shoulder where the blade had gashed him. With another force invocation, I returned the sword to my grip and stalked toward him. His sunglasses had fallen off, and surprised blue eyes stared from his face. He jerked his wand at me several times, but no bolts would emerge. The blade's enchantment had broken his magic. I kicked the wand out of his hand and touched the blade to his throat.

"You're oh for two, pal. Care to explain why you attacked me?"

His eyes shifted, as though searching for an escape.

"You can try to get up, but this blade has cut through thicker necks than yours."

Muttering, he showed his hands.

"Better start talking," I said. "Fast."

"Can I at least grab another beer?"

I ALLOWED JAMES HIS BEER, warning him that if he shouted for help

or did anything funny, I would force blast him into next month. But he was already injured, his magic spent. I doubted he would test me.

We sat at the dark end of the empty bar, a couple of brown bottles sweating in front of us.

"All right," I said, the tip of my blade against James's side. "Mind telling me why you went homicidal on me out there?"

James sighed. "I was warned you might show up."

"Warned?" Coldness enveloped me. "By whom?"

"Chicory."

"Chicory? *Our* Chicory?"

"Yeah, he stopped in a couple weeks ago. Told me to be on the lookout for someone who'd come with a lot of questions. Said the person would be the agent of some evil wizard, a dude named Lich or Lech, and not to let him get away." James took a swig from his bottle. "And then here you come, driving Chicory's car. What the hell was I supposed to do?"

I took a sip from my own bottle and worked out the timing. Two weeks before would have been when Chicory was training me. He *had* ducked out a couple of times, though he'd never said for what. There was nothing about the visit in James's file, either.

"Were those his exact words?" I asked. "Agent of an evil wizard?"

"Best I can remember. I was sort of stoned when he dropped in."

I still couldn't believe this guy was a member of the Order.

"Did he say anything else?"

"Naw, that was pretty much it."

Had the warning to James been some sort of insurance in case the operation failed and the Front used Whisperer magic on me? Or had it been in case the Front told me the truth?

"To be honest, you don't strike me as an evil agent," James said.

"Would've been nice if you'd exercised that bit of judgment outside," I muttered.

By warning James, my former mentor had put me in a bind. No matter what I told him, James was now biased against me. *Just like Chicory biased you against the Front,* the voice whispered in my head. If the potion I'd drunk that morning had worked, I was hearing my own voice. If not, I could well be hearing the Whisperer's corrupting words. I squeezed my beer bottle in frustration. Never mind James trusting me—could I trust myself?

"Before you started firing bolts at me," I said, "you suggested you'd met someone higher up in the Order."

"Naw. I just wanted my money back." He froze with his bottle halfway to his mouth. "Shit. Does that mean you're gonna kill me now?"

"No," I said.

“Good.” James took his swallow. “How about I ask you a few questions, then?”

I checked my watch. I still had a couple hours before I needed to be at the airport.

“Shoot,” I told him.

“What do you really do?”

“Same thing as you,” I said tiredly. “Stop amateur conjurers, blow up nether creatures, close holes to their worlds. Oh, and get threatened by the Order. I cover Manhattan. I helped the mayor’s eradication campaign last month. You might have read about me in the papers?”

“Eradication who?”

“Don’t follow the news, huh?”

He shook his head and took another swig. “So why does Chicory think you’re working for an evil wizard?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time. Not like I can hustle now.”

I looked over at him. Something in his hunched posture spoke to sincerity. Maybe he’d been lonely for the company of another magic-user, someone he could talk to. I doubted he’d told his life story to anyone else—or at least anyone who wouldn’t have laughed him out of the room. In any case, it wasn’t as if I’d be giving away any secrets. I had nothing to lose.

“It’s going to sound insane,” I said.

“Hey, I dig insane.”

“All right, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” In a lowered voice, I began. I told him about my mother’s suspicious death, the silence from the Order, and how my consulting Lady Bastet had led to her murder.

“So *that’s* why someone offed her,” James said. “I’d wondered about that.”

I nodded, going on to tell him about my own investigation, which had gotten me a warning from Marlow, or at least someone pretending to be him; my session in the scrying globe, where I experienced my mother’s murder at the mage’s hands; and then what Chicory had told me about Marlow taking up Lich’s work to bring forth the Whisperer.

“No one ever told me about any Whisperer,” James said.

“According to Chicory, that info isn’t shared with novice practitioners.” I wondered now if that info was shared with anyone, save in cases where a magic-user came too close to the truth.

“Always did feel like I was at the kid’s table,” he said.

“Don’t take it personally. I was right there beside you, bib and all.”

“So why were you told all this stuff?”

"Because Marlow's my father."

"No shit?" James said.

"Yeah." That much I knew to be true. Both Chicory and Connell had said so. I told James about being sent to the Refuge, allegedly to destroy Lich's book, and what had actually happened—from battling Marlow to being sent back here to investigate the Front's claims for myself.

James's sunglasses remained fixed on me as I spoke. When I finished, he said, "So … Chicory's history?"

"That remains to be seen. Either he's dead, or he'll return in four days. Well, three days now."

"So you wait and see," James said. "That would settle that question, right?"

"If Connell is telling the truth, Chicory will be coming for me. I know too much now. Were I to alert the magic-using community, he'd be deprived of the power he needs to sustain himself and the portal to the Whisperer. Plus, he'd be looking at a much larger resistance." I thought of the hundreds of files I'd given to Vega. Convincing those magic-users would be another matter, of course.

"What if this dude Connell is lying?" James asked.

"That's what I have three days to find out."

James blew out his breath as though to say, *Sucks to be you, bro.*

"What do you think?" I asked pointedly.

"What do I think?" He set down his bottle and studied me for a moment. "I think if you're on the bad side of this, you don't know it."

"What makes you say that?"

"I play cards, five card stud mostly. There my magic only really helps when I'm the dealer, so I've had to learn to read people, pick out their tells. For the past hour, you haven't shown me a one. Which suggests that everything you've said either happened, or you believe it happened."

"So you understand my dilemma."

"Yeah, you're either looking at a bluff or a double bluff."

"What does that mean to us non-card-playing types?"

"It all goes back to the mystic's murder," he explained. "The perpetrator made it look like a wolf attack, right? With a simple bluff, he would've done that to hide his involvement—in which case the killer is Marlow. But with a double bluff, he'd have done that to make you *think* the second bluff about Marlow was the truth. In which case the killer is Chicory."

I nodded. I couldn't have put it more succinctly myself.

"The anti-hunting spell that earned you those claw marks from your cat," he said, "what you saw in the scrying globe … Any advanced magic-user could have put those together."

I nodded some more, glad now I'd shared my story with James. I hadn't learned anything new, no, but the back and forth was helping to bring the essential questions into relief.

"Mind sharing your plan?" James asked. "I mean, besides shaking down guys like me?"

I rotated my bottle on the bar, wondering how far I could trust him. James had been warned I was coming. He'd been ordered to stop me. He had failed, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try again. The man was an admitted hustler. He claimed to believe me—and he'd brought up some great points—but he could also be playing me, setting me up for the next round.

And if Chicory had gotten into his head…

"I'd rather not," I said. "No offense."

James shrugged and signaled to the bartender he was ready for another round. We drank for the next few minutes in silence, billiard balls clacking in the next room. James was halfway through his new bottle when he said, "Before he left, Chicory did this strange thing he'd never done before. Sort of mashed his thumb between my eyes. Said it was supposed to protect me from mind magic or something. You ever heard of anything like that?"

I straightened. "Did you feel a pressure behind your eyes, in your ears?"

James shook his head. "Nothing like that. More like a tingling that just sort of went away."

I considered that. "What do I look like?" I asked suddenly.

"Huh?"

"Just describe me."

Connell had claimed Lich's magic had poisoned me, superimposing nightmare images over everything I'd observed in the Refuge. If James was seeing someone other than me, I would have my answer.

"Hell, I don't know," James said, "you look like you're about my height, dark hair. Could probably stand to gain a few pounds. You worry a lot too. Got these deep lines between your eyebrows. And I'm guessing by the episode outside you can't read women too well. Sort of awkward around them."

"Alright, alright," I said, my face growing warm. Yeah, he could see me, zits and all, which seemed to tip the scales toward Chicory's version of events. I checked my watch. "I need to get going," I said, pushing myself from my stool. "Thanks for talking to me."

"So, that's it?"

"I have your number. I'll let you know if I find out anything."

He rotated on the stool. "While you're out, doing whatever it is you're gonna do, is there something I could be doing?"

I stopped. "You said your first mentor was in the Catskills?"

“Yeah, about two, three hours upstate.”

“Could you take a drive up there?” I asked. “Tell her what I told you? I sent a couple messages to the Order about my trip to the Refuge and Chicory’s death, but I never heard back. I don’t have a handle on what’s going on yet, but certainly the more who know, the better.”

He stood and tossed a twenty onto the bar. “I’m on it, boss. It’s been sort of beat around here anyway. Hey, you got a number where I can reach you?”

I pulled out the pager Vega had given me. The number was taped to the back. “Do you have something to write with?”

“Here,” James said, taking the pager. He turned it around and read the ten numbers aloud. Then he closed his eyes and repeated them before nodding and handing it back. “It’s stored,” he said.

“Offer you a ride?” I asked as we stepped outside.

“Naw, I’m just a few blocks north.”

I gripped his elbow before he could turn away. “Listen, I’m not sure what I might be getting you into, so you need to tread carefully.”

James’s mouth leaned into a grin. “I’m not real good at that, boss.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle as I released him and we headed our separate ways.

Maybe I had an ally in James after all.

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The trip to Romania was long and sleepless. I wrestled with James's assessment the entire way: a bluff or a double bluff. Marlow or Lich/Chicory. I had good reasons to suspect both and not enough to clear either. I had to trust that finding Lazlo would tip the balance toward one or the other.

From the train station in Bacau, I hustled to the edge of town where I'd been told the final bus of the day would be departing for the villages in the foothills. Eleven years earlier, I'd arrived on a weekend day and had had to find a cart driver—who'd turned out to be Lazlo. After an exhausting twenty hours of travel, I hoped I was close to seeing him again.

A cold drizzle began to fall as I approached the end of an asphalt road that turned into a rutted pair of tracks. I looked around in exasperation. No bus. Had I missed it? A car horn blew twice. I looked over at a livestock truck I had assumed abandoned. Its pale blue body was rusted, and it was leaning on one side of the road. When its lights flashed on and off, I spotted someone sitting in the driver's seat. The window cranked down as I hustled up.

"Has the bus to the villages left yet?" I asked in Romanian.

"That depends," a woman's voice replied in accented English.

From beneath the bill of a newsboy hat, a young woman with dark red hair and a mole over the left corner of her mouth peered back at me. Though she wore the grave face of so many in the countryside, her beauty startled me.

"Depends on what?" I stammered.

"If I have any riders."

It took me a moment to process what she was saying. "Wait, *this* is the bus?"

"What were you expecting?" she asked. "A double-decker?" Without waiting for a response, she said, "You can put pack in back and ride up front with me. The weather is not expected to improve."

I thanked her and did as she said, dropping my pack in the open truck bed. When I slammed the passenger door and settled in, cane between my knees, the young woman put the truck in gear and bumped forward, the rain already beginning to form brown puddles in

the road ahead.

"I am Olga. Where are you going?"

"Hi, I'm Everson. There's a farm between here and the last village. The owner's name is Lazlo."

She stopped the truck. "There is no such farm."

I looked over at her, but her face remained fixed on the road ahead. "There is, actually," I said, trying to hide my irritation. "I stayed there for a summer, about ten years ago."

"The farm burned down five years ago," she said.

Horror prickled over me like a violent rash. "Burned down? What happened?"

"There was fire."

"Yeah, thanks, but does anyone know what started it?"

"No. Fire destroyed everything. House. Farm. Horses."

"And Lazlo?" I asked, my voice dry and husky.

"They think he was inside house. In cellar."

"What do you mean *think*?" I asked. "Did they recover his body or didn't they?"

"No one will go to farm now. Ghosts have been seen."

"Ghosts? What ghosts?"

"Do you want me to take you back to town?"

"No, I want you to take me to the farm," I answered stubbornly.

"I can take you in morning."

"There's no time," I said, which was true. If the Front could be believed, I had roughly two days until Lich's return—and one of those days would involve travel back to the States.

I expected Olga to object, but she released the brake, and the truck began to rumble forward again. We rode in silence. She twisted the headlights on shortly and rain sliced through the beams. The forests and fields darkened around us. Olga snapped on the radio, and a man singing a sad ballad crackled from the speakers. I refused to believe she had the right farm, refused to believe it had burned to the ground and that Lazlo was … *missing? dead?*

No, I decided. *Once I show her where it is, she'll realize she was thinking of a different farm, a different person.* But I couldn't forget what Connell had told me about Lich eliminating the most powerful wizards, sacrificing them in his effort to bring the Whisperer into our world.

After thirty minutes that seemed longer than the flight over the Atlantic, a derelict chapel appeared among some trees. "The turnoff is up here on the right," I said, squinting past the headlight beams and pointing. "There. The farm is about a kilometer down that drive."

Olga pulled in front of the drive and idled. "This is as near as I will go."

I almost asked her why before remembering what she'd said about the ghosts. This was the farm she'd been thinking of.

"Do you mind waiting for me?" I asked.

She looked at the bills I held toward her. "One hour," she said at last, accepting them. "Do you have light?"

I started to nod before realizing my staff wouldn't work as well in the rain, especially if it started coming down harder. Olga reached beneath her seat and handed me a brick-shaped flashlight. When I snapped it on, shadows sprung over Olga's face, making her appear sinister.

"Beware the ghosts," she said. "You will know them by their whispers."

Her words sent a bone-deep chill through me. Gripping the flashlight and my cane, I stepped out of the truck and into the Romanian night.

I MADE my way up the drive, rain pattering over a poncho I'd pulled from my pack and slid into. Though it had been more than a decade, I remembered every turn in the dirt drive and even some of the larger trees that bordered it. Toward the end of my training, Lazlo had challenged me to direct force invocations down the winding drive to a target without rustling the leaves. It was as hard as it sounds.

At the final turn, I stopped and looked out over an open yard that was almost unrecognizable.

No.

Olga was right. The place had been decimated by fire, and judging by the weeds growing up through the heaps of charred timber, it had happened a number of years ago. I stepped forward, shining the flashlight over the ruins of the main house and then the barn. The place where Lazlo had helped me to construct my mental prism, to strengthen and hone it, push energy through it … gone.

Even the fencing that had once penned his beloved horses, Mariana and Mihai, had burned to the ground. My heart thudded sickly in my chest.

I turned back to where the house had once stood. Though I could see nothing through my wizard's senses, dark energies seemed to pollute the atmosphere. Perhaps my own sense of foreboding. Far away in the mountains, wolf cries echoed.

They think he was inside house, Olga had said. *In cellar.*

I drew my sword and aimed it at the hill of ruins. *"Vigore!"* I shouted.

Energy pulsed bright from the blade, overcoming the dampness to

slam into the ruins and plow it back in a wave. Chunks of charred timber rained down in the fields beyond. With a second force invocation, I cleared the remaining debris from the trapdoor that led down to Lazlo's cellar.

I stood over the door and listened. All I could hear was the rain tapping my poncho. The door broke away when I pulled the handle—the hinges had been baked black. I set the door aside and shone the flashlight down the steps. During my time with him, Lazlo had forbidden me from going down to his lab. That had been fine by me and my phobia then, but now I had no choice.

If Lazlo *had* been trapped, his remains might tell me something.

I set the flashlight down and, with a Word, summoned a glowing shield and descended. The steps groaned underfoot. At the bottom of the steps, I grew my light out. The brightness revealed a small room overgrown with black mushrooms and mold. Similar to what I'd seen in the Refuge, the wet growth swarmed over everything: stacks of old books, shelves holding vials and spell implements, even over the remnants of a casting circle that took up most of the floor.

In the circle's center lay a mound. No, a body.

Lazlo?

The body was on its side, facing away from me. As I approached, my light illuminated wisps of dark hair, a deflated wool sweater and trousers, the last tucked into a pair of battered rubber boots. Kneeling, I set my sword down, gripped the body's bony shoulder, and pulled it toward me. For a moment the body stuck to the ground before releasing with a wet rip.

"Jesus!" I cried, and jumped back.

My heart thundered in my chest as I looked at my former mentor. Or what remained of him.

The eyes staring up at me were large toadstool-filled sockets. Dark, wet growth had erupted over the rest of his face, reminding me of the wargs. I eased forward again, staff held up. Black mold glistened in the light, making it appear as though the growth was crawling over him.

"What in the hell happened to you?" I whispered.

The casting circle around Lazlo was for protection. He'd been trying to defend himself. But against what? Something stronger than him, evidently—and Lazlo had been a Third Order mage. My gaze moved back to his body. Bared teeth showed through Lazlo's decayed lips.

If only he could talk, I thought, then stopped.

Lazlo had had a barn cat, a tough gray tom named, well, Tom. During my final month here, I'd found Tom in a corner of the barn one day, his mouth open, tongue out. When I nudged him with my

shoe, his body was as stiff as a board. I told Lazlo the bad news. He simply nodded and wrapped Tom in a towel that I assumed he would bury him in. The next day, though, while I was loading hay from the barn, a thick, purring body swiped my legs. I looked down and there was Tom: dusty gray coat, cloven right ear, and one hundred percent alive.

I sprinted inside and told Lazlo.

"It was not his time," my mentor said.

"Not his time?" I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. "Tom wasn't sick yesterday, Lazlo. He was dead."

"Yes, but that was my fault. Not his."

"Wait … you *resurrected* him?"

"I shouldn't have put the rat poison where he could get to it."

"How?" I pressed.

The magic we'd practiced to that point had involved basic invocations. But resurrection?

Lazlo's lips tensed in what was the closest he ever came to smiling. "One day, Everson." Which was his way of saying it was an advanced spell for which I didn't have the necessary experience.

"Well, that day's today," I whispered now, grimacing at the idea.

I still lacked the experience, to be honest, but I'd read enough books in the decade since to understand how resurrection worked. For someone as long gone as Lazlo, I couldn't hope for much, maybe a few seconds of life, but if it was enough for him to tell me who had killed him, I would be closer to understanding what was happening, who I could trust. And if Lazlo had resurrected Tom, he would have the necessary spell ingredients.

I wheeled toward his shelves and began unstoppering old vials and sniffing their contents. *Fennel … yarrow …* I was looking for moschatus, a rare oil. On the top shelf, I found it. I re-stoppered the vial and began looking through his moldy collection of books until I found a familiar tome that focused on the dead. I had the same tome in my own collection. I flipped to the section on resurrection.

The next half hour involved reconfiguring the casting circle and preparing Lazlo's body with the moschatus oil.

At last, I stood outside the circle.

"Cerrare," I said. Energy coursed through my sword and closed the circle. Consulting the book, I began incanting in an ancient tongue. Cold energies swirled throughout the room. I trembled from them as well as from a deeper dread around what I was doing. Restoring a decayed form to life, however briefly, felt wrong on so many levels. Also, except for in exceptional circumstances—and with prior approval—the Order forbade resurrections.

What if the rule is to prevent communication with sacrificed magic-

users? the voice whispered inside me. A voice I no longer suppressed. I would know something shortly.

"Vivere!" I finished.

I watched Lazlo's body, a part of me hoping it would remain still, that the spell wouldn't take hold. I was violating a law of nature, which may have been the actual reason behind the Order's prohibition. But I steeled my mind, reminding myself that I was doing this for a magic-using community that could be in mortal danger. I doubted Lazlo would object. He—

I broke off mid-thought and stiffened. Had Lazlo's jaw just shifted?

I leaned nearer. His bared teeth parted, releasing two scratchy words. "I … hurt."

"Lazlo?" I said, my own voice barely a whisper. "Lazlo, it's Everson."

His body remained still for so long, I thought I'd lost him again. But then his top arm trembled as though trying to lift his wasted hand. His jaw shifted again. "Everson?"

"Yes, Lazlo," I said, kneeling and placing my hand over his. I tried to ignore the wet feel of the fungi and tissue. It was like he was being slowly digested. "What happened?"

"Leave," he said.

"I need to know what happened to you."

"I'm in … the pit."

"The pit?"

"In … him."

"Who?"

"They'll … take you … too."

A shudder passed through me. "Who? Lich? The Front?"

His head shook, though whether in a tremor or to say he didn't know, I couldn't tell.

"My hair," he rasped. "Take it … find me."

I nodded quickly, cut a wisp of his dark hair with the sword, and placed it in my pocket.

"Leave," he repeated in what sounded like a plea. I imagined his cloudy wolf-torn eye staring into mine, though on his corpse there was only the cluster of toadstools. "They … they're coming."

"Is Lich alive?" I asked.

"Hurts," he mumbled. The trembling in his wet hand ceased.

"Lazlo?" I asked, giving him a light shake. But the resurrection spell was spent, the magic expired. My former mentor was a fungus-riddled corpse again, his soul returned to whatever plane it inhabited.

In the pit? I thought. *In him?*

Had Lazlo meant Lich? That would jibe with what Connell had told me—how Lich was sacrificing souls to feed his efforts as well as to

sustain himself. But Lazlo could also have been cast into the pit by Marlow and consumed by Dhuul. Hence, “in the pit, in him.”

They’ll take you too, Lazlo had said.

Who were *they*?

Above me, the rain fell harder. Wind shrieked past the doorway to the cellar. It was only when the wind died again that I realized the cellar stairs were creaking. Someone or something was descending.

Above the creaks, a pair of low whispers sounded.

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I rose from beside Lazlo's body, light radiating from my protective shield, and adjusted my grip on my sword. Shadows shifted on the wooden steps as the whispers grew. I remembered what Olga had said about no one coming here because of the ghosts. *You will know them by their whispers*, she'd said.

If Lazlo's soul had been sacrificed to the Whisperer, then a conduit now existed between his body and Dhuul's realm. Maybe no more than a seam, but enough for shadow entities to come and go, to feed on the lingering magic, of which there were still traces.

Those were the ghosts the villagers had seen. And now *I* was seeing them.

I shuffled back. Though immaterial, the man-sized beings were horrid. They descended on tentacled legs. More tentacles writhed from their shapeless bodies of matted hair and sharp beaks. They slowed as they neared the bottom of the steps, their whispers alien and wet. Multiple sets of pale eyes glowed into view, all of them watching me.

"Vigore!" I shouted.

In my fear, my force invocation lacked control. It rammed into the stairs, sending splintered timber ricocheting from the walls and off my shield. Shrieks sounded. I jumped back as something lashed out—a tentacle. It grazed my neck, suckers grasping for purchase, before recoiling back into the darkness behind the ruined staircase. The skin where it had touched me burned like fire.

My shield didn't stop that thing, I thought in horror.

I backed from the shadowy creatures as they crawled from the ruins, their whispers turning to low hisses.

"Illuminare!" I called, channeling power through my coin pendant.

The coin glowed, limning the creatures in blue light. They slowed, eyes squinting away. The coin held an enchantment to ward off shadow creatures, but these shadows were from much farther down. The enchantment seemed to have a stalling effect, but it wasn't stopping them.

Another tentacle lashed out. I grunted and brought my sword up in a parrying motion. The blade sliced harmlessly through the tentacle. The tip of the tentacle affixed to my chest, the contact like boiling

acid. I screamed as I felt my soul lurch inside me, yanked toward the point of contact. I dug into my pockets, searching for … *there!*

I yanked out the glass vial Arianna had given me. Pulling the stopper free with my teeth, I splashed the creature with the clear liquid inside. The creature withdrew with a screaming hiss, its tentacle releasing me. I advanced on the two of them, splashing more liquid. Steam spewed from their forms.

"Go!" I commanded, my voice trembling from the pain in my chest. "Go back to your cursed realm."

I splashed several more times. How much of this stuff would it take to banish them? The creatures had retreated, screaming, to the far corner of the cellar when I realized the vial was almost empty. *Need to make tracks,* I decided, easing back and recovering my sword.

The stairs were gone, but I could use a force invocation to launch myself like I'd done in the Refuge. I stood beneath the hole where the trap door had been, aimed my blade at the ground—and cried out as a tentacle whipped around my ankle. Fire enveloped my lower leg, and I could feel blood soaking into my sock.

A second tentacle seized my sword and wrenched it away. I heard it clatter off somewhere. Another tentacle wrapped around my staff. The light from the opal sputtered as the creature and I struggled for possession. Multiple pale eyes emerged from the shadows.

You're not thinking, I chided myself through the pain. *Don't have to banish them … just have to close their portal.*

My gaze shifted to Lazlo's body. Burning it would shut the door on this end.

I plunged my free hand into another pocket and withdrew a vial of dragon sand. The tentacle around my ankle flexed. I landed prone with a grunt, out of range of Lazlo. Pain seared my stomach as a tentacle snaked underneath me. I could feel its suckers opening and closing.

Not suckers, I realized in horror. *Mouths.*

Each mouth had a ring of spiny teeth, and they were tearing at my soul, trying to suck it out. I imagined my body buried in toadstools, my soul trapped in a pit, in endless pain. Desperate not to meet my mentor's fate, I clawed at the wooden floorboards.

I grunted as part of a fingernail tore off. The tentacles were winning. They flipped me onto my back and began dragging me toward the creatures' gaping beaks. As I passed beneath the cellar doorway, rain spattered over my face. I squinted against it. In the fog of pain, it took me a moment to realize someone's silhouette was framed in the doorway.

A deafening blast broke through the cellar. The creature holding me screamed. Its tentacles recoiled, releasing me. Another blast went

off, but I was on hands and knees now, crawling toward Lazlo's body. I reached him and shook a dose of dragon sand over him.

"Fuoco!" I shouted.

I reared back, forearms to my face, as searing flames billowed from his body. The creatures' screams turned to piercing shrieks. I turned in time to see their shadow forms breaking apart as the fire from the dragon sand consumed Lazlo's body, slamming closed the portal.

I recovered my sword and looked up. A thick rope now dangled through the cellar doorway. Sheathing my sword and sliding the cane through my belt, I seized the end of the rope.

"Got it," I called.

In a jerky motion, I began to rise. After ten or so feet, I was able to reach up and grab the doorway frame. Grunting, I pulled myself through. Olga, who was larger than she had appeared in the truck was staring down at me, rain dripping from the bill of her newsboy hat.

"I heard screams. I thought you fell into ruins."

"Thanks." I gained my feet, the places where the tentacles had seized me still burning like a bitch. My soul didn't feel quite right, either. Like it had been gashed and torn. As I whispered a healing incantation, Olga slung the rope in manly loops around an arm. My gaze moved to the shotgun she had leaned against a charred length of timber.

"What was in that?" I asked.

"Rock salt," she answered.

I nodded. Sometimes the best deterrents against evil were the most basic.

When Olga finished gathering the rope, she stuck her arm through the coil, pushed it up to her shoulder, and grabbed her shotgun. In rubber boots similar to Lazlo's, she marched from the ruins. I took a final look around, my eyes falling at last to the cellar, where Lazlo's remains continued to flicker. Pain and rage stormed through me. Murdered.

But by whom? Lich or Marlow?

By the time I caught up to Olga, the rain was falling harder.

"Do you have place to stay?" she asked.

A PACK of lean dogs ran up to the truck as we pulled into the yard in front of Olga's house. They began barking when they saw Olga had brought company, but when she shouted several harsh words in Romanian, they stopped and sniffed tentatively toward my crotch as I got out.

"I really appreciate this," I said.

“There is extra room,” she replied.

Though it had stopped raining, water dripped from my pack as I grabbed it from the back of the truck, shouldered it, and followed her toward the one-story farmhouse. She lived on the outskirts of Bacau, not far from the train station. More important than a spare bed, she had a working phone.

Blocking the dogs with her body, she opened the door for me and then followed me inside, closing the door to their whines and whimpers.

“My father,” Olga said, nodding into a living room where an older man in a stained T-shirt sat in a recliner in front of a television. When he squinted over at us, I raised a hand in greeting. He took a gulp from a mug and turned his face back to the glowing screen.

“Always drunk,” Olga explained, not bothering to lower her voice. “Give me pack. Phone is in kitchen.”

I did as she said and found the wall-mounted phone. Fortunately, it was a rotary dial, like my own. I pulled James’s number from my wallet along with a phone card. After a minute of dialing, the line began to ring.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“James, it’s Everson.”

“Dude,” he said over the scratchy line. “Holy shit.”

My heart thudded. “What’s going on?”

“Alright, so I drove up to the Catskills yesterday, and the house is toast.”

“Burned down?” I asked, already knowing.

“To the foundation. Neighbors said it happened a couple of years ago. They had no idea what ’came of Elsie. I went to the local police station and asked there, but they didn’t know anything either. Not what started the fire or wherever Elsie might have gone. Her body wasn’t found among the ruins. It’s like she just dropped off the map.”

I wondered if there was a clump of toadstools in Elsie’s shape somewhere on the property, Elsie’s soul in the pit with Lazlo.

“Did anyone talk about hauntings?” I asked.

“How did you know?”

“Just a hunch.”

“Yeah, police said that not long after the fire, a couple kids drove up there to neck in a convertible. Bodies were found the next morning, both of ’em strangled, necks black and blue. Something similar happened to a hiker.”

I rubbed the spot on my neck where the tentacle had lashed me.

“They never found the perp, so rumors about angry spirits started popping up,” he continued. “When I was walking around that place, something felt off to me, foul. Couldn’t nail it down, though.”

I could hear my blood swishing in my ears. Two high-level members of the Order slain in the last few years, houses burned to the ground, murderous creatures set loose. But still the same question: Lich or Marlow?

"What did you find in Romania?" James asked.

"Same thing," I said hollowly. "Lazlo's house was torched. His remains were in the cellar. Something used them as a portal to attack me, shadow creatures from Dhuul's realm. Probably the same things that killed those kids in the Catskills."

James was lucky they hadn't attacked *him*.

"What in the hell are we dealing with?" he asked.

"Whisperer shit," I said. "Nightmares from that realm are coming through. Right now the seams are few and far between, and the shadow creatures seem to be staying in proximity to the bodies, but if whoever's behind it completes the portal, it's going to get really ugly. "

"And you still don't know whether it's the bluff or the double bluff?"

The liquid in Arianna's vial *had* repelled the creatures. But was that all part of the setup to engender my trust?

"I don't," I admitted.

"And nothing from the Order?"

"Not a peep."

"Maybe that's your answer," he offered.

"Or maybe that's just the Order being the Order."

"So what do we do?" James asked. "Just wait around?"

"I'm going to make another call. I'll find you when I get back to the States."

"I can send an update to the Order," he offered.

"Yeah, please do." Though I wondered if there was any point.

We hung up and I dialed Detective Vega.

"Croft," she said. "I've been trying to reach you all day."

"I must be out of satellite range." I checked the pager—no signal—and put it away again. "Were you able to take a look at those files?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. For most of them, the names weren't unique enough to be reliable identifiers. I couldn't pull up anything on those. But on the ones that were unique, there's nothing."

"Nothing?" I said. "What do you mean nothing?"

"They're not in the records databases. No addresses, phone numbers, voter registrations, utility bills, court records. There's nothing, Croft. That's what I'm telling you. It's like they don't exist."

"They're dead?"

"More like never born. Could this Chicory have, I don't know,

made them up?"

My lips pursed as I considered the question. I'd found my file, James's file. His wasn't made up … or was it? "Hey, did the department do a background check on James before you contracted him?"

"Hold on." Through the buzzing line, a keyboard clacked. I awaited the verdict, my hand clenching the phone until it throbbed. After another few minutes, she said, "Yeah, he's on here. And I just double-checked the public records. He's legit."

I relaxed my grip. "Good. But the others…?"

"Nothing," she repeated.

I tried to think about it from two perspectives. In the Chicory as Lich case, he would have left the files out, knowing I would track down James—whom he had warned of my arrival in advance. The remaining files would be fakes, denying me access to the magic-using community. But in the Chicory as Chicory case, my mentor might have done the exact same thing, knowing that if I was captured by the Front, I'd be carrying Whisperer magic. Like someone infected with a virus, I would have to be quarantined, possibly even killed, so as not to infect other magic-users.

By winning over James, had I done just that?

"There's no info on Chicory's license plate either," Vega said. "It's a made-up number."

That didn't surprise me. Knowing Chicory, he'd probably enchanted it into inconspicuousness to avoid the hassle of registration. But *did* I know Chicory? I blew out my breath in frustration.

"Dare I ask how things are going?" Vega asked.

"Not good," I said, looking around the kitchen. Simple folk charms adorned several shelves, and I noticed someone had lined the window sills with salt. "How about there? I mean, apart from the files."

Vega gave a tired snort. "You'd think it's a full moon. Crimes are up across the city."

"Monsters?" I asked, thinking of the shadow beings.

"Nut cases," she replied. "All the perps have psych issues of one kind or another, and we're running out of places to stick them. The hospitals' lockdown wards are at full capacity. There was a riot over at Bellevue last night. The patients went full zombie, biting anything in sight. Not even sleeping gas could subdue them. The police ended up having to shackle them."

"Jeez," I said, imagining the scene. I remembered what I'd told James about things getting uglier if the main portal to Dhuul were to open. Were we witnessing the beginning?

"You might want to stay put," Vega said dryly.

"I'm actually flying back tomorrow morning. I'll let you know if I

learn anything else about the case. Right now, we're still looking at Marlow or Chicory."

"Are you leaning more toward one or the other?" Vega asked.

I thought about it for a moment. Either Connell and Arianna had told me the truth or they had screwed with my head so badly that I didn't know which way was up. I wanted to tell Vega I was still leaning toward Marlow. Instead, I banged my forehead against the plaster wall twice.

"No," I said.

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That night I had horrible, disjointed dreams of death and decay.

Lazlo's wolf-torn eye appeared from a mound of toadstools. *I hurt,* he repeated in a wet, whispering voice. *I hurt, Everson.* Shadowy tentacles lashed and grabbed me. I struggled to fight through them, to burn Lazlo's remains and close the portal.

And then the scene changed to a locked psych ward. Patients with blood-smeared faces and limp robes moaned and shrieked on all sides. I looked around for my cane, but I didn't have it. My coin pendant was gone from my chest. With insane eyes, the patients closed in. A stink of rot rose from them. I batted at their grasping hands, but there were too many of them.

Their eyes turned into fungus-filled sockets as they seized me and pulled me toward their gaping mouths. Mouths that became dark, fang-lined pits, plummeting to the very heart of madness.

I thrashed awake, blood roaring in my ears. I immediately sensed I wasn't alone in the guest bedroom. I turned my head. A white T-shirt with a swollen belly seemed to float in the center of the room. As my eyes adjusted, the rest of Olga's father emerged from the gloom.

He groaned as he hefted an axe overhead.

"Vigore!" I shouted, swinging my cane toward him.

The force blast caught Olga's father in the stomach and propelled him into the far wall. The axe fell, the blade burying itself in the middle of the wooden floor. Olga's father began to sob. A moment later, footsteps ran down the hallway, and the bedroom light flicked on. I looked from Olga's father to Olga, who stood in the doorway. I'd placed a locking spell over the door the night before, but it must have come apart during my nightmare.

Olga rushed to her father and helped him to his feet. *"Come, Papa,"* she said in scolding Romanian.

"Holy hell," I breathed, sitting up on the side of the bed, my heart still galloping at full tilt.

Olga walked her sobbing father from the room, bits of plaster falling from the back of his head. There was a bowl-shaped indentation in the wall where he'd impacted. Olga returned a minute later.

"I am sorry," she said. "The drinking has made him sick up here." She tapped her temple as she pried the axe from the floor.

"You think?" I asked, my voice hard and shaky.

"I fix your breakfast then take you to train."

I checked my watch and nodded. It wasn't like I was going to fall back to sleep anyway.

THIRTY MINUTES later I sat across from Olga, bowls of porridge in front of us. We ate in silence for several minutes.

"So how long has he been like that?" I asked softly, feeling bad for having raised my voice at her in the bedroom. From the back of the house, I could hear her father snoring deeply.

"He has been drinking long time," she said. "But he turned sick a week ago."

"What do you mean 'turned sick'?"

"Getting up at night. Chasing dogs around yard. This was first time he carried axe."

Would have been nice if you'd shared the bit about his mental health before inviting me to stay the night, I thought, but didn't say it. I was lining up the info on her father with what Vega had told me about the sudden rise in crimes back in New York, the riot in the hospital's psych ward…

He turned sick a week ago.

That would have been about the same time I destroyed what I thought was Lich's book. The act should have deprived Marlow of his power. But if Connell was telling the truth, if I had instead destroyed an Elder book that had been jamming Lich's portal, then my act would have given the portal new life.

Allowing more Whisperer magic through, I thought.

But that was assuming the spike in insanity was a result of Whisperer magic. I could just as easily be seeing a connection where none existed. *Or being* made *to see one*. I thought.

"Why did you come?" Olga asked suddenly.

I looked up, only now realizing she had been watching me for the last minute. "I told you," I said, picking through my milky porridge with a spoon. "I wanted to check on an old friend."

"You needed his help," she stated.

I started to nod, then caught myself. "What makes you say that?"

"It is in your eyes."

Something in her forwardness made the skin over my chest prickle. I thought about how she had been waiting for me in the truck yesterday, how she had appeared with a shotgun armed with salt at

Lazlo's house, how she just happened to have a spare room for me to stay in. Like James, had she been warned about my coming? Beneath the table, I gripped my cane.

"You knew I'd show up here," I said.

"Yes," she admitted, taking a large bite of porridge.

I scooted the chair out and stood, pulling my sword from my staff. "Who told you?"

She finished chewing, unconcerned by my weapon. "Bones."

"Bones? Who the hell is Bones?"

I flinched when she stood, but she walked the other direction into the kitchen, where she opened a cupboard. I watched her carefully. She returned with a small leather pouch, which she held out to me. No magic stirred around it. I hesitated before I moved my sword to my staff hand and opened the pouch with two fingers. It contained a pile of small animal bones.

"Oh," I said, feeling foolish.

She had been referring to cleromancy, or bone-reading, a folk practice as old as human settlement. One many people still dabbled in. For the reading to be accurate, though, the diviner or the divination object needed to possess magic, and I sensed none in either.

Olga sat again. "I can do reading if you want."

"What did you see?" I asked. "In your earlier reading?"

"I was told that a man of great power would come. That he was trying to know something."

"I don't know about the *great power* part," I mumbled.

"I saw what you did at the house," she said. "You made fire with voice."

She was talking about the *fuoco* invocation, when I'd cremated Lazlo's remains to close the vent to Dhuul's realm.

"The bones said I would help this man," Olga finished.

She had already pushed our bowls and coffee mugs to one side of the table. Now she opened the pouch and upended it. The assortment of bones from what looked like a large rodent spilled over the table. Olga's brown eyes seemed to darken a shade as she gazed down on them.

"I see confusion," she said, her fingers hovering over a configuration of rib bones.

You've got that right, I thought, though she could also have overheard my conversations with James and Vega last night. I'm sure I had sounded plenty confused then.

"You are torn between difficult choices." Her strong, country fingers moved back and forth between where the bones seemed to have landed in two roughly equal quantities. "Is it this one, or this one?"

Lich or Marlow? I thought.

"And here is your answer," she said.

I leaned forward despite that I still felt no magic around the ceremony. Olga was pointing at a small, solitary shoulder blade that had fallen in between the two groupings of bones.

"What does it say?" I asked.

"That when you understand what this single thing means"—she tapped the shoulder blade—"one choice will fall away." In demonstration, she swept the bones on the right side off the table into her waiting palm and returned them to the pouch. "It will no longer be both."

No more fifty-fifty, in other words.

I eyed the shoulder blade for another moment. The shape of it seemed to tug at something in my mind, but I couldn't say what. Anyway, what was the point? There was nothing mystical at work here.

"Great … thanks," I said.

She nodded and swept the remaining bones into the pouch and tied it off. How desperate had I become that I was looking to a mortal with a bag of rat bones for answers?

I pulled the pager from my pocket to see if it was getting a signal. Still out of range. I pocketed it again, hoping it would pick something up at the train station. James had planned to contact the Order, and on the off chance they'd responded, I wanted to know as soon as possible. I started to imagine James waving his message over his flaming cup and then stiffened.

The cups.

I thought of my own silver cup. Narrower at the bottom, wider as you approached the rim. From the side, it looked roughly like…

"A shoulder blade," I said.

"You understand?" Olga asked.

I stared but without seeing her. I had been told that our cups gave us access to an administrative branch of the Order. An office where communications were prioritized and then sent up the appropriate channels for decisions to be made, which were sent back down and shot to us as responses. But if there was no Order, then those same communications were more than likely going to the one person most interested in keeping tabs on us.

I thought of the gold cup I'd found in Chicory's room.

When Olga's face reappeared beyond my thoughts, a small smile was wrinkling the beauty mark above her lips. "Your eyes have changed," she said. "You understand the meaning."

"I think so, yeah," I replied, my heart beating urgently. Like Olga's rock salt, sometimes the best magic was no magic at all. "How soon

can we leave for the train station?”

“As soon as you are ready,” she said.

I stood quickly. “Give me five minutes.”

I’ve got a gold cup to hack.

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Somewhere over Spain it occurred to me that I might not have to hack Chicory's cup. My own cup required an incantation to send messages, but not to receive them. As long as my cup was jetting a flame, the messages arrived on their own. Hopefully, Chicory's cup operated the same way—in which case, it would just be a matter of igniting the oil crystal.

By the time the plane touched down at Newark International, I was running on unhealthy levels of adrenaline and caffeine and little else. I shouldered my way through the crowds and stood in the taxi line outside.

"Where to?" a cabbie asked when my turn came.

I climbed into his backseat with my pack. "Gehr Place. Near 495."

He nodded and shifted his ample bulk as he put the cab in gear and reset the meter. "Where you coming in from?"

"Eastern Europe."

He snorted. "Surprised you were in a hurry to get back."

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't been following? The city's a flipping zoo. Last night, we had maniacs running around the streets, climbing buildings, breaking windows. A couple of 'em tried tipping over my taxi on East Fourteenth. Told dispatch I was done for the night. Screw that."

"Who were they?" I asked.

"From the looks of 'em? Vagrants and junkies. The police eventually rounded them up, but it took all night. Like some kind of frigging *Night of the Living Dead*. Cost a few officers their lives too." He shook his balding head. "Must be a nasty new drug on the streets."

Or a nasty new magic, I thought. *One I potentially let through.*

If Whisperer magic *was* coming through, it might not have been powerful enough to influence sound minds—yet—but it looked as if it was worming its way into those already afflicted, dragging them into deeper madness. I thought about the patients in the psych ward Vega had mentioned, Olga's alcoholic father, and now junkies.

"You're my last drop of the evening."

"Oh, yeah?" I said absently.

"Gonna return the cab and go straight home to the missus. Bar the

doors. No way I'm gonna be out and about with crap like this going on. Not worth it for a few extra bucks, you know?"

I nodded as, with stinging, sleep-deprived eyes, I peered out the windows. We were climbing onto I-78, the setting sun throwing final, long shadows over the interstate. The west-bound lanes were clogged. It looked like the afternoon rush, but it was almost eight p.m.

The cabbie snapped on the radio.

"…mobs and mobs of them," a woman said in a breathless voice. It sounded as though she was speaking through a telephone. *"They're going block by block, setting fire to anything that'll light. We've got cars on fire, buildings on fire…"* She took a sobbing breath. *"…people on fire. Me and my husband barely got away. They're … they're crazy."*

"Aw, Christ," the cabbie said. "You hearing this?"

"Are you somewhere safe now?" the male talk show host asked.

"Yeah, I think so," the woman replied, not sounding at all certain.

"If you're just joining us, ladies and gentlemen," the host said in a grave voice, *"the Bronx is burning. I repeat, the Bronx is burning. Roving gangs with no apparent affiliation began setting fire to the south Bronx about an hour ago, and their numbers have only grown despite the arrival of police on the scene. Something similar is happening in Staten Island and east Brooklyn, we're being told, but the details at this time are sketchy. The mayor has declared a state of emergency and is recommending that those who can safely evacuate the city do so at this time. Everyone else should remain inside with their doors and windows locked."*

I looked over at the lines of bumper-to-bumper cars in the opposite lanes. Even from my distance, I could see the fear and tension on the drivers' faces, several of them with children in the back seats. I squinted and craned my neck until I could make out a brown haze rising in the north.

"Evacuate the city?" the cabbie complained. "How am I gonna do that? My wife weighs five hundred plus. She's practically bedbound."

My pager began to go off. Its signal had come back on in the airport in Romania, but no one had sent any pages. I dug into my pocket, pushing past the Ziploc bag of Romanian salt Olga had given me for protection, and found the pager. I pulled it out and checked the number. Vega's.

"Hey," I said, "mind making a quick stop so I can make a call?"

"You're not carrying a phone?" he asked.

"No."

I thought he was going to offer me his, which I would have had to turn down or risk exploding it, but he sighed and said, "I should probably fill up anyway. Let's make it quick, though, huh?" He turned off the next exit ramp and pulled into a gas station with a payphone.

I ran up to the phone and called.

"Vega," she answered.

"Hey, it's Everson. What's going on?"

"That's what I'd like to know," she said. "Are you back in the States?"

"Yeah, just got in."

"The nuttiness I told you about yesterday? It's gone into overdrive. Mayor Lowder's been asking about you. He wants to know if there's something supernatural at work and, if so, what you can do about it."

"I'm hoping I'll have an answer shortly," I said.

"One that'll put an end to this?"

"Eventually." I hoped.

Off to my left, stupid laughter filled the inside of a parked Plymouth station wagon, its windows cloudy with smoke. When the skunky smell of pot reached me, I turned the other way and blocked the fumes with my collar.

"Eventually?" The rawness in Detective Vega's voice told me she hadn't gotten much sleep either. "Croft, I'm not sure we have till eventually. The crazies are going after people now."

In her voice, I could also hear her fear for her son.

"Yeah, they were just talking about that on the radio," I said. "Look, I'll contact you as soon as I know something. In the meantime, tell Budge I'm working on it."

"How bad can we expect it to get tonight?" she asked.

I paused as I considered the question. Like black magic, Whisperer magic was probably more potent at night. And if today's craziness had started before sunset… "Bad," I said. "Probably the best you can do is get everyone vulnerable out of their path. I think Budge is on the right track with the evacuation order. I promise I'm doing everything I can."

We said goodbye, my hand trembling as I hung up.

Had I unleashed this? *Was* I responsible for the death and destruction?

"Hey!" the cabbie shouted. "The hell you think you're doin'?"

I turned to the island of gas station pumps, where the cabbie had pulled in to fill up. A man had been hanging around the pumps with a squeegee when we arrived, offering to wash car windows for a few bucks. Now he was wrestling my cabbie for the gasoline nozzle.

"Help!" the cabbie gasped.

I ran over as the cabbie sagged to the pavement, clutching his chest. Squeegee Man stepped on his stomach and wrested the nozzle the rest of the way from his grip. He stood back and aimed the nozzle at the cabbie like a gangster preparing an execution.

I fumbled for my cane and shouted. The cabbie threw his arms to his ducked head as gasoline jetted from the nozzle—and hit my shield

invocation. The gas poured off both sides and splashed to the pavement.

At neighboring islands, people began to scream and back away. Squeegee man wheeled with the nozzle, jetting gallons of gasoline everywhere. Wild, red-rimmed eyes stared from a twitching face. The man was gone—but not far enough. His other hand was rooting inside a jacket pocket for what I rightly guessed was a lighter.

As I caught the flash of red plastic, I thrust my cane at him and shouted, *"Vigore!"*

The force blast caught him in the chest and shot him from the pumps. He dropped both lighter and nozzle en route to the side of a tractor trailer, where he slammed to a stop, then pancaked to the pavement.

Exhaling, I turned back to the cabbie, who was using the side of his cab to climb to his feet. A tide of gasoline rolled toward a metal grate, its fumes bending the air and making my eyes water. Those who had fled began to venture back. A woman in business attire stooped for the dropped lighter.

"Are you all right?" I asked my cabbie.

"Did you see that?" he wheezed, still clutching his chest. "You see that?"

Behind me, I heard the distinct *snikt* of a metal wheel. I turned to find the woman who had retrieved the plastic lighter holding it in front of her face, staring at the slender flame. She was an older woman, dressed in a pants suit and wearing expensive-looking jewelry, but like Squeegee Man, she didn't seem all there.

"Put that out!" I shouted.

Her staring eyes fell to the tide of gasoline, some of it running under cars. With a strange flattening of her pupils, she knelt as though to touch the flame to the gas.

"Protezione," I called, enclosing the lighter in a shield. Without air, the flame died. The woman released the lighter and stepped back. I shrunk the shield until the lighter detonated inside it.

The woman's eyes shifted toward me. Her face began to contort, red lips peeling back from her teeth. I glanced around. Everyone else seemed fine. Maybe this lady had a touch of age-related dementia, making her more susceptible to Whisperer magic. I readied my cane reluctantly, not wanting to hit her with an invocation, but not sure I would have a choice.

At that moment, two young men strolled into our midst, smoke wafting from their long hair and jackets. They were the ones who had been hot-boxing inside the Plymouth—and smelled the part. "Whoa, check it out," one of them said. "It's like a gasoline pond or something."

For the love of God.

The other one gave a deep, throaty laugh of agreement. I watched in horror as a third member of their party slung his arm around the woman who had nearly finished Squeegee Man's job.

"What happened, lady?" he asked her.

"Get back!" I shouted.

The three potheads turned toward me. "Dude, what's your problem?" one of them asked.

"She's…" I almost said *dangerous*, but the woman was looking around now in uncertainty, eyes normal again. With a sound of disapproval, she drew the young man's arm from around her shoulder and marched to her car—a shiny white Bonneville—got in, and drove away.

"Can we get outta here already?" the cabbie asked me.

The lights over the pumping stations turned on, pushing back the dusk. Near the diesel pumps, Squeegee Man was still down, a gas station employee standing over him to ensure he stayed that way. How long before the magic became strong enough to overwhelm the rest of us? I wondered.

I turned back to the cabbie, who didn't appear to have seen my magical exhibition.

"Yeah," I said. "Good idea."

WHEN WE PULLED up to the safe house at Gehr Place twenty minutes later, I paid the cabbie double the fare.

"You sure about this," he asked, counting through the bills.

"I feel responsible for what happened to you back there," I said.

"You weren't the one who went apey with the gas hose."

No, I thought, *but if I let that magic through, I might as well have been.*

"Stay safe," I told him, clapping his large shoulder.

"Thanks, you too."

The cab droned away as I climbed the front porch steps. At the threshold, I checked the house for wards or protective energy. Still down. Inside, I dropped my pack, then flicked on lights en route to Chicory's room. A quick look around showed it to be in the same state of general disorder as when I'd left it four days ago. His gold cup still sat on the corner of his lab table.

"Fuoco," I said.

From the bottom of the cup, a red flame jetted up and stood in a spire. I watched it for several minutes, waiting for messages to begin spouting forth. I had only been present a handful of times when

messages arrived through my own flame—pieces of parchment paper that would unfold as they descended, coming to a neat rest in the center of my desk as though someone had set them there.

But Chicory's flame only hissed quietly.

What did that tell me? That Chicory had locked his own cup with an enchantment? Or that he wasn't Lich? Given the insanity unfolding outside, I was leaning more and more toward the first.

But was I certain enough to return to the Refuge?

The answer was not yet. *"Goddammit,"* I hissed at myself.

I was considering my options when the front door opened.

My chest locked around my slamming heart, and I froze.

The door closed. A stuffy silence followed, as though the person were standing in the foyer, studying my pack.

Cutting the light, I whispered, "*Spegnere.*" But the flame from Chicory's cup continued to burn. I tiptoed over to it, removed the cup from the table top, and placed it behind a stack of books on the floor. The corner of the room glowed as if from a night light, but the flame was no longer in plain view. As I was creeping into a position behind the door, sword sliding from staff, a floorboard creaked under my foot. I stiffened, swearing at myself.

"Hello?" someone called.

Footsteps began to click down the hallway.

"Everson? Is that you?"

It was Chicory.

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"Everson?" Chicory called again. "Are you in here?"

My throat tightened and I swallowed with a dry click. I couldn't have answered if I'd wanted to. His return on the fourth day meant he was Lich, didn't it? Or was there some other explanation for his return? As his footsteps drew nearer, a corkscrew of dizziness hit me. I risked another few steps to make my way to the wall beside the door, out of sight.

"Oscurare," I whispered, deepening the shadows in the room and drawing back my sword.

Chicory began muttering to himself in his curmudgeonly way. He sounded so familiar, so … harmless. Was it all a guise? His footsteps stopped in the doorway. I could see his hand pawing the wall before it found the light switch. When he stepped in, his mop of gray hair gave a little hop.

"Everson!" he exclaimed, his lips breaking into a smile. "Goodness, I feared I'd lost you!"

He stepped forward as though to clap my shoulder, but I showed him the ends of my sword and staff. "Stay right there," I said, backing away, my voice low and husky. "Reach for your wand or utter the first foreign syllable, and I swear to God, I'll end you."

Chicory frowned sternly. "They got to you, didn't they?"

"It doesn't matter. I want to hear how you're alive."

"It *does* matter," Chicory countered. "Don't you remember what I told you before you left? How long did they hold you for?" When I didn't answer, he said, "Well, long enough to poison you thoroughly, I can see that much. Come, there's no time to waste. This is going to take Elder-level magic, but I can at least contain the poison, keep it from consuming the rest of your mind."

"How are you alive?" I repeated.

Ignoring my earlier warning, Chicory began bustling around the room plucking spell items from the mess. "I'll tell you everything after we've begun," he said. "No telling how much time you have left."

I pressed the tip of the blade to his back. "No," I said. "You'll tell me now."

The coldness in my voice seemed to get through. He stopped and

let out a huff. “I never died, Everson.”

“Bullshit. I saw you get run through down there.”

“You saw a doppelganger get run through down there.”

“Doppelganger? You better start making sense.”

Chicory turned to face me. “When I received the message that you had destroyed the book, I tried to retrieve you, but the defensive magic around the realm was too strong. I then tried to go there myself, but the same magic repelled me. My only recourse was to send a doppelganger. A weaker version of myself that I managed to imbue with your father’s essence. It got in but was slain before my doppelganger was able to kill Marlow and pull you out. An unfortunate turn of events, certainly. But that’s what you saw. Not me.”

“What happened to the real you?” I challenged. “Tabitha said you never came back.”

“The death of one’s doppelganger is like suffering a mini-death oneself. I transported myself to a healing plane where I went into a coma to speed my recovery. I would have been recuperating for months, otherwise.”

Could the Front have known that?

“Then why didn’t the Order come for me?” I asked.

“The Order didn’t know you were there, and that’s … well, that’s my fault, Everson.” He gave an apologetic shrug. “In all the excitement, I neglected to tell them I was sending you in.”

I shook my head. “Nice try, but I sent them a message when I was in the Refuge.”

“I don’t doubt you did, Everson—or at least tried. The message never would have gotten past their defenses.”

I thought about Connell’s lack of concern upon seeing the cup I’d manifested.

“What about the messages I sent when I got back?” I pressed. I was about to mention the messages James had sent as well but felt a sudden protective instinct for him and held back.

“Still going up the chain of command, no doubt,” Chicory said. “Once we get you stabilized, I’ll use my direct line to the Elders to update them and arrange to have you cleaned. Listen to me, Everson.” Despite my aimed sword, he leaned nearer, eyes growing sterner. “Whatever they did to you down there, whatever they told you, it was with the aim of turning you against the Order. That’s what Whisperer magic does. It takes any doubts you may have and bends them so that their version of the truth seems the only one that can be believed.”

I wanted to trust him, but I steeled myself.

“If I destroyed Lich’s book,” I said, “then how come things are falling apart out there?”

“Falling apart?” He looked around in confusion. “I just came from the city. I got my coordinates mixed up when I returned from the healing plane and ended up on Roosevelt Island.” He chuckled at his own carelessness. “In any case, I didn’t notice anything amiss.”

“So the fires didn’t raise a red flag for you, or the riots, or the mass evacuation?”

“Everson,” he said, pulling one side of his jacket slowly open until I could see his wand in the inside pocket. “I’m going to draw my wand and use it to cast a spell to stop the spreading magic.”

“Try it, and I’ll run you through for real.”

“You’re not making any *sense*,” he insisted.

“Oh, so that’s it? I’m crazy? Is that the game?”

“Not crazy,” he said. “Under the influence of magic.”

I stared at him, trying to arrange my thoughts into something coherent, but they were slamming around like bumper cars. Everything Connell had told me about my mother, my grandfather … it had all fit. But if what Chicory was saying about Whisperer magic was true, of course it would all fit.

“Lazlo’s dead,” I said suddenly.

“What?” Chicory asked, looking genuinely surprised. “When did this happen?”

“Five years ago.”

“And how do you know this?”

“I went to Romania. I saw his body.”

“Went to Romania?” He looked at me askance.

“Here.” I moved my sword to my staff hand, pulled my flight itinerary from my pocket, and handed it to him. “See for yourself.”

I watched Chicory as he unfolded the piece of paper and moved his gaze down it. At last he nodded and handed it back. “I want you to take another look at this, Everson, and tell me exactly what you see.”

“I already know what’s on here,” I said, snatching it back. “I’ve been carrying it for the last three—”

But when I looked down, it wasn’t the printed flight itinerary from the airport. It was my packing list from when I was about to leave my apartment for the safe house a few weeks earlier. I rechecked my pockets before looking at the packing list again. “What did you do to it?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” Chicory said quietly. “The protective energy around the house is charging up again. It must be clearing your mind.”

It was a trick. It had to be. I wasn’t crazy.

I dropped the list, pulled out my wallet, and tossed it to him. “Look inside and you’ll find boarding passes, train tickets. Check out the bills while you’re in there, too. Do you think I just walk around with Romanian currency?” My laugh verged on a mad giggle. I pressed a

hand to my sweating upper lip as I watched him.

"The only thing resembling a boarding pass is this," he said, holding up my New York City transit card. "And your currency is all in U.S. dollars."

"My passport, then," I said quickly. "It's in my pack in the front room. It'll be stamped." I started to push past Chicory, then stopped cold. Tabitha had just walked into the room.

"I see we're a happy household again," she said dryly.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded. "Why aren't you at the apartment?"

"That's what I'd like to know. We've been in this pit for almost a month. A month too long, if you ask me." She parked inside the doorway and combed a licked paw over her right ear.

"I took you back to the apartment four days ago."

She snorted. "Four days ago you were hardly in the land of the living."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" My temples were beginning to ache.

"Oh, come now, darling. Ever since you got back from that realm, you've been practically catatonic. I've been doing everything. Fixing our meals, feeding you." She made a face. "Helping you to the bathroom."

I shook my head. "No."

"Um, *yes*," Tabitha said.

I opened my mouth, then hesitated. Another thought occurred to me. "Detective Vega and I have been in contact. She even gave me back my pager." I pawed my front pockets, but the bulky device was nowhere to be felt. Impossible. It had been there not forty minutes earlier when she'd paged me. Had I left it in the cab?

"Everson," Chicory said sharply.

"No," I backed away from him. "I *know* what I experienced."

"Think for a moment," Chicory said. "Listen to me. This is exactly what Marlow wants—to bias you against us, to turn you against the Order, to harness your powers to his purposes. He had you down there for several days. He convinced you that what he'd told you could be verified up here, correct? He set you free for you to find out. But not before ensuring that the only journey you took would be in here." He tapped his temple. "A mind he poisoned with Whisperer magic."

"James," I nearly shouted. "James Wesson!"

Chicory shook his head. "That means nothing to me."

"He's a—a wizard—a member of the Order. Here in New York City. You left his file out so I'd find him, but not before you told him to expect me so that he could stop me from…"

From what, exactly?

“From finding the truth?” Chicory asked, raising a bushy eyebrow. “And if this James failed, and you learned the truth despite his efforts to stop you, the more convincing those truths would appear to you, no?”

I stammered for a moment, then looked over at Tabitha. She looked back at me as though I was suffering a nervous breakdown and couldn’t decide whether that merited pity or scorn.

I sat down hard on the one chair in the room and dug a hand into my hair. Chicory was right. There were two versions of reality: the one before the Front had captured me, and the one after. I had been counting on my reason to determine which was the truth. Reason. The very thing Marlow would have corrupted.

I looked up at my mentor. “I need to talk to Detective Vega. If she says we never spoke, that will settle it. I’ll go along with whatever needs doing, and we’ll get back to the business of Marlow.” That decided, the exhaustion I’d been holding back broke through me, and I slumped in the chair.

Chicory nodded. “Very good, Everson. Stay here and rest, lie down if you need to.” He waved a hand toward the cluttered bed. “I’ll bring the phone up.”

When he left the room, Tabitha fell in behind him. My gaze moved from their departure to the flight itinerary—correction, packing list—I’d dropped on the floor. I thought back over my journey to Romania. The flights, the trains, the visit to Lazlo’s farm, my stay with Olga and her father, the bones she had read. It had all felt so damned real!

I lifted up my shirt to check the place on my stomach where the shadow creature had lashed me. Last night an ugly blue-green mark had run from my left ribcage down to my right hip, complete with bite marks. Right now there was nothing save pale skin, the faintest suggestion of abdominal muscles, and a mole I’d had since birth. Was Whisperer magic really that powerful?

Apparently so, I thought with a stab of disgrace.

I patted my pockets again. No pager. I looked through my wallet. Nothing to suggest I’d been in Romania. I stepped out into the hallway. Back in the kitchen, Chicory had stopped to heat up some goat’s milk for Tabitha. I went the other direction. My backpack wasn’t in the foyer where I was sure I’d dropped it. In the bedroom where I’d stayed, I found my clothes, books, and duffel bag, never packed. I could feel the hum of protective energy that encircled the house. *Was* it helping me to perceive clearly again?

Or is it poisoning your thoughts once more, the insidious voice whispered. But the voice no longer held the same power.

I looked down at the bed, where I could see an imprint of my body. I imagined myself lying there in a catatonic state for the past

four days, Whisperer lies twisting through my mind like black tentacles.

I returned to Chicory's room and walked along the lab table, absently touching the glass tubes and notebooks, telling myself there was no shame in succumbing to a magic that had nearly overwhelmed the Elders. Anyway, I had destroyed Lich's book, not an Elder book. Meaning no Whisperer magic was flowing into the world. That was a huge relief right there. And as Marlow's power dwindled, he and the Front would have nowhere to hide. The Elders would take care of them.

With that knowledge, I no longer cared to see the face behind the gold mask. Marlow was corrupt and evil, a vessel for the Whisperer. He wasn't my father. He was nothing to—

At the end of the table, I had arrived at the pile of newspaper clippings and begun poking through them: the article on the robe of John the Baptist as well as those concerning exhibits of other magic-sounding artifacts. But near the bottom of the pile, at a depth I hadn't ventured to the last time, I arrived at a glossy program for an opera. The program showed a black-robed figure standing center stage.

He was wearing a gold mask.

Heart thudding, I pulled the program all the way out.

The gold mask with its frowning mouth was identical to the one I'd seen on Marlow. I read the caption below:

RADICAL! VIOLENT!

In this reimagining of Verdi's *Macbeth*, we go not to Scotland, but ancient Greece, where an ambitious young magician murders the King of Athens and embarks on a bloody rule.

My eyes skipped to the bottom:

Praise for *The Death Mage*, recent Opera Award nominee and…

"Here we are," Chicory said.

I jumped and shoved the program back into the stack. My mentor had returned with the phone, but he wasn't looking at me. In search of a jack, he was kicking through the clutter along the baseboards. I glanced back at the articles. In his carelessness, Chicory had neglected to conceal the most damning clue: his model for what would become my boogeyman.

There was no Death Mage. Chicory had invented him.

I turned from the table and eyed the chair where my cane was

leaning. As Chicory continued to root around, I crept toward it.

"Could've sworn there was a place to plug in," he muttered.

I reached the chair and slowly grasped the cane's handle. But when I tried to unsheathe the sword that had slain Lich's form once before—the doppelganger story was BS too, I now decided—it wouldn't come free. I rearranged my slick grip and tried again. Normally, it was an unconscious act, a smooth release, but now the wood around the blade seemed to clench.

As though magic were holding it closed.

"Ah, there it is," Chicory said, stooping down to snap the plastic head into the jack. He turned, a pair of fingers hooked under the phone's switch hook, and was in the act of extending the handset when he stopped and pulled it back. "Why, Everson, you're as pale as a ghost. Something the matter?"

"No," I replied, thinking about what James had said about bluffs and double bluffs. I watched Chicory for a tell. A subtle force wriggled through my mind, and Chicory glanced past me to his lab table.

And there it is, I thought numbly.

"Damned Whisperer magic," he said, setting the phone on the chair and bustling past me. "What's it making you see now?" He arrived at the stack of articles and began searching through them.

The odds had finally shifted decisively, away from Marlow as the culprit and toward Lich. If the magic around the house was clearing my mind, I shouldn't have been able to see the program. Not in a way that implicated Chicory and not in that much detail.

Praise for The Death Mage…

There was no time for second-guessing. I would only talk myself back into a fifty-fifty stalemate—or Chicory would do it for me.

I rushed forward.

With my cane locked, I wasn't sure I would be able to cast through it. Rather than risk it, I raised the cane overhead and, using all of my strength, brought it down on the back of Chicory's head.

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The blow landed at the base of Chicory's skull with a dull thud, and he collapsed to the floor.

"Darling! Have you gone fucking mad?"

I spun to where Tabitha was entering the room, her eyes large with alarm. I stared back down at my mentor, terrified now that I'd been wrong and had killed or severely injured him. I backed from him, the cane limp in my suddenly-cold hands.

Blood spread through the back of Chicory's moppy gray hair in a bloom so dark it was nearly black. I imagined Marlow watching through Tabitha's eyes and congratulating the Front on their successful manipulation of me.

My gaze jerked to the opera announcement, still on the table, the cover featuring the robed figure in the gold mask. An illusion? But something was releasing in my mind, as though a hand that had been balling up the vessels was letting go. Familiar colors swirled around my vision. I'd last seen them in the Refuge, after I'd watched Chicory fall. They dissipated quickly this time, and I looked around until I spotted my dropped packing list. It was a flight itinerary again. I snatched it up and held it toward Tabitha.

"Can you read this? Tell me what it says."

But Tabitha was backing away, refusing to look.

I dropped the itinerary and lifted my shirt. The ugly blue-green lash across my stomach was back. "Or how about that? Can you see it?"

"Um, darling," she said, nodding past me.

I turned and almost lost my balance. Chicory was pushing himself up from the floor, but he wasn't Chicory anymore. He was changing, shifting. A red layered robe replaced his professorial attire while his mop of gray hair shed to reveal a bald, vein-mapped head. When he turned toward me, his eyes glowed the same yellow I'd glimpsed on the night Chicory had appeared in my apartment following Lady Bastet's murder. Violent power warped the air around him.

"No more artifice," he said, his voice deep and strange.

I was vaguely aware of things fluttering down around me. One landed next to my foot. I glanced down. It was a message from James

Wesson, updating the Order on our situation. Other messages were spewing from the column of fire still hidden behind the table, landing around the room. I spotted the one I'd sent from the Refuge. No Order meant all of the messages had gone to the only Elder still alive. Murderer of his siblings. Pawn of Dhuul.

There was no longer any doubt.

"Lich," I said.

"I know what I penned in the archives," he said, "but I did not create the fissure to the Whisperer—I merely found it. Dhuul's coming is inevitable. That is what my brothers and sisters refused to accept. They wanted to expend all of our power and resources to stall Dhuul's arrival—for that is all we could have done, stalled it—while I proposed we align our purposes to the being's and become true immortals."

"At the expense of the world and every living thing in it," I said thinly.

As Lich's transformation finished, he loomed on the far side of the room, his wasted head nearly touching the ceiling. The gray skin around his starved mouth was so tight and sunken that I could see the outlines of his teeth. His lips peeled back into a gruesome simile of a grin. "The world and every living thing would have been pulled into chaos anyway."

"Is that why you've been sacrificing magic-users?" I asked, remembering Lazlo's fungus-riddled corpse.

"I am not sacrificing them, Everson," he replied, his teeth continuing to show. "I am taking them with me. When I attain immortality, so too will they." He stepped toward me. "So too will you."

I turned and lunged for the doorway but collided into an energy field. A mind-numbing charge ripped through me, dropping me to the floor. I looked around for Tabitha, but she had already fled.

"I have little more use for you," he said. "Your soul is too green to harvest. Ending you would be the most prudent action, but you did destroy the Elder book, and for that you've earned a place among the immortals. It's what you've longed for."

I *had* been fascinated by the idea of the Elders, of one day attaining that state, but not like this.

"You'd only be fighting the inevitable," Lich reminded me.

"Inevitable, my ass. You murdered the Elders because you knew they had the power to close the fissure and keep Dhuul from our world. Or maybe I should say Dhuul had you murder the Elders."

Lich's brow bunched together and his yellow eyes flared. He raised a hand of long fingers and stretched them toward me. I felt my mind begin to twist and bend.

"Vigore!" I shouted, thrusting my cane toward him.

But instead of a force blast, a torrent of nightmare bats spewed from the end of my cane. I covered my head as they flapped around the room on membranous wings the color of human flesh.

Beyond them, Lich said, "You are in my world now."

I peeked beneath a forearm, and discovered that I was no longer in Chicory's room, but standing at the edge of a monstrous hole that plunged into the earth. The bats I'd unleashed flapped around its opening, poisonous vapors drifting up from the roaring black depth. I peered over the precipice. A matrix of bile-green energy held the hole open. I understood these were the souls of those Lich had murdered and claimed over the centuries. I sensed they were still living, still conscious. *I hurt,* Lazlo's voice rasped in my mind.

My head pounded with the knowledge he was in that foul-smelling pit.

Around the pit's inside was a staircase that spiraled down. Creatures like the ones I'd encountered in Romania, all tentacles and shaggy bodies, trundled up and down in a nightmare procession. But most disturbing to me was the hole itself, a growing portal to Dhuul.

I could hear the being's wet, horrid whispers now, issuing from the depths. The sound pulled and dug at my mind from all sides, like something chewing on rotten meat.

Hands clamping my temples, I backed away, squishing through the toadstools that swelled and stretched toward a forest like the one I'd seen in my nightmares. Across the pit stood a forbidding stone fortress, from where I guessed Lich oversaw his excavation project.

"Are you ready for immortality?" he asked.

The mage was looming over me, an astral projection—like myself, I realized. Our bodies were still in the safe house. Lich's long-fingered hand writhed toward my head like tentacles. He began to chant, his voice aligning with the whispers climbing from the pit until they were one.

I struggled to wrench myself away, but a force pierced my soul like the hooks in the mouths of the shadow creatures I'd faced in Lazlo's cellar. Only these hurt worse. Much worse. I squirmed, teeth gnashing, half insane from the pain. The hooks began to jerk and pull. I tried to draw back, but they had my soul. I could feel them drawing it out of me.

"Are you ready to become a god?" he pressed.

"No…" The word squeezed from my throat, a strangled cry.

The tugging stopped. I squinted my eyes open to find that Lich was no longer chanting. His head was tilted to one side as though listening. In the next instant, the world seemed to rip open. Wind roared around me as a pair of silver bolts slammed into Lich's head.

The hooks released my soul, and I crashed back into Chicory's bedroom, back into my body. More wind cyclоned around as I pushed myself into a sitting position. An entire side of the house had torn away, as if by a storm. Beside the toppled lab table, Lich was on his knees, clasping his smoking head.

"C'mon!" someone shouted.

James was standing in the yard, energy crackling from his wand, waving for me to follow him out. I found my cane and staggered to my feet. I was about to run toward my fellow wizard when I remembered what Connell had said: *You'll have no defenses against his magic out there.*

Though my staff still refused to release the sword, I noticed that the shield Lich had erected over the doorway had fallen, probably when he went down.

"This way!" I shouted back at James.

A hand on the top of his cowboy hat, James climbed inside, shot a worried glance at Lich as he crossed the room, and followed me down the hallway. I threw open the doorway under the staircase. *"Illuminare!"* I shouted. Light swelled from the orb as James and I raced down the staircase and across the basement's earthen floor. At the basement's far end, the casting circle was still intact.

"Inside the circle," I panted.

James followed me into the etched circle, and we turned toward the staircase. "So, double bluff?" he asked.

"Double bluff," I confirmed.

From the stairs, a pair of glowing eyes approached. I aimed my trembling cane at it. "Is someone going to tell me what in Lucifer's name is going on?" Tabitha asked, her orange coat emerging into my light.

"Quick," I said, waving to her, "get inside!"

To Tabitha's credit, she picked up her pace to a heavy trot and even jumped over the edge of the circle so as not to disrupt it. "Ooh, who's this?" she asked, blinking up at James.

"James Wesson," he said, affecting a slight drawl. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Believe me, the pleasure's entirely mine," Tabitha replied.

"How did you know where to find me?" I asked.

"Your pager," James said, gesturing to my pocket. Sure enough, there was a heavy lump there again. "When I asked to hold it back at the bar, I slipped a hair of dog ear between the device and case. Gave me something to eavesdrop through for the last few days, make sure you were shooting straight. When I heard Chicory denying all the things you'd done, I knew the fix was in. I tracked the hair here before the magic over the house had ramped up to full strength." He looked

around. “But now what are we doing?”

Arianna had said I was to return to the portal on my side and they would transport me back to the Refuge. I was about to tell James as much, when the house began to shake. Debris rained from the rafters overhead. At the far end of the basement, a green glow descended the stairs.

“Cerrare,” I shouted, snapping the circle closed.

But had I just protected us, I wondered, or trapped us?

Lich appeared at the center of the sickly orb of energy, the outstretched fingers of one hand writhing toward us. I felt the magic penetrate the circle, penetrate our minds. Tabitha’s hair puffed out, and she let out a low yowl. Even James looked uneasy as he edged back a step.

C’mon, already, I thought desperately toward Connell and Arianna.

“You’re only fleeing the inevitable,” Lich said. “If not here, then there…”

With the next blink of my eyes, we were in the forest in the Refuge. Connell, Arianna, and a small army of magic-users surrounded the clearing, wands aimed toward us. James adjusted his cowboy hat as he turned in a circle.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said.

“Stand clear!” Connell shouted.

I became aware of a ripping sound above me. Tabitha bolted from the clearing first. James and I followed, taking up positions behind the ring of magic-users. Above the spot where we had been standing, reality itself was tearing open onto a growing black portal.

Calling power to my prism, I readied my cane.

Lich was coming through.

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Lich's eyes burned yellow, his red robes flapping around him in the widening portal between our worlds. In one hand he held a wand while with his other, he fashioned a warding sign. His lips moved in a chant, but above the tearing noise, I couldn't hear what he was saying.

"Respingere!" Connell cried. A current of blinding white energy ripped from his wand and exploded into Lich.

The other magic-users began to cast as well, streams colliding into the portal like ribbons of lightning. Within seconds a harsh scent of ozone filled the air—and no wonder. These were centuries-old practitioners unleashing some of the most powerful magic I'd ever witnessed. Any contribution I made would be puny in comparison.

I readied my cane anyway, squinting at the flashing impact site where Lich had been emerging. How much more magic could his defenses withstand? They surely had to be faltering, I thought, though with more hope than conviction. Lich was a first-generation magic-user and drawing power from a being more ancient than the oldest saints, a being that hungered for chaos.

A black tentacle shot from the exploding light and wrapped around a female practitioner's throat. She dropped her wand as the tentacle hoisted her into the air. Another tentacle twisted itself into a man's long blond hair and jerked him from his feet. He shouted above the noise.

I sprinted toward the woman, who was closer. I instinctively pulled on my sword handle, forgetting that Lich's magic had entrapped the blade inside the staff. It refused to release.

Switching my grip, I aimed the cane at the tentacle and shouted, *"Vigore!"*

Much like what had happened in Lazlo's cellar, the power that emanated from the cane passed through the tentacle as though it wasn't there. More tentacles shot by me. Shouts and choked screams punctuated the riot of noise. As magic-users flailed, the streams of energy from their wands dwindled until I could see Lich again.

He was larger now, closer. His wand and hand were maintaining a protective field while writhing tentacles sprouted from his back. Without the Elder book to staunch the flow of Dhuul's influence, Lich

was stronger than the last time he had come through, as Chicory.

He might actually overpower them this time, I thought.

Savage barking sounded, and several of the Refuge's mastiffs broke past me. Connell tried to shout them back, but they took no heed. They changed as they sprinted, white flames enveloping their muscular forms, making them appear larger, more mythic. One by one, they leaped at the portal, at Lich, only to burst apart. White flames rained around the clearing.

"Submit to the power of Dhuul!" Lich called, his molars bulging through the skin of his jaw. "Submit and all will be forgiven! I will take you with me! I will make you all immortals!"

The tentacles extending from his back gave a hard wrench. A pair of sick crunches sounded, and the woman and blond-haired man he had first seized plummeted to the ground.

"The alternative is death," he finished.

Anger exploded through me and emerged from my lungs as a *"Forza dura!"*

I thrust the cane toward Lich. Somewhere beneath my storm of emotions, I knew it was a futile act. But this was the mage who had murdered my mother, who had watched her burn, and who continued to flaunt his disregard for life. My invocation was as spontaneous as it would no doubt prove ineffective.

But the force that burst from my cane staggered the mage. I blinked for a second. I hadn't imagined it. Lich had taken a step back, tentacles recoiling. And the look on his face… What remained of Grandpa's enchantment had hurt the son of a bitch.

I gathered my breath for another blast, but before I could release the Word, a tentacle lashed toward me. I swung the cane into its path. The tentacle caught it, wrapping the opal end.

"Respingere!" I cried, struggling to hold on.

Light and force pulsed from the opal, but the tentacle smothered both. I leaned from its muscular pull, the heels of my shoes digging into the ground. As the tentacle writhed toward my white-knuckled grip, I began to feel Lich's warping power, began to feel my thoughts pulling at the seams, threatening to burst into violence and disorder. A straining whine emerged from between my clenched teeth as I fought to hold onto the cane as well as my sanity.

No matter what, something was telling me, *you cannot lose your sword and staff.*

Lich was staring down at me, the vessels throbbing over his head. A grim determination creased his face, even as more magic-users arrived and fresh energy collided into his shield. I was practically sitting now, like the anchor in a game of tug-of-war, my palms on fire. The tentacle wound toward my cramping hands. My grip slipped to

the end of the cane handle.

And the blade slid free.

I fell onto my back. The tentacle whipped back toward the portal, clutching my staff. I heard magic-users thud down around me as the remaining tentacles released them. The tentacles disappeared into the portal along with Lich as the final emanations from the magic-users closed the opening.

Smoke drifted through the silent clearing.

Someone coughed. I looked from my naked blade toward the sound to find one of the magic-users who had been hoisted up writhing on the ground, clutching her throat. A green-black bruising stained the skin around her neck. Her eyes bugged madly from her face.

Arianna rushed to her and spoke a healing incantation. Moments later, light from her wand enveloped the woman. When the light receded, the woman was gone, transported to the palace to be purged of Whisperer magic. Several others who had been injured were treated similarly by other magic-users.

"That was some crazy-ass shit," James said, coming up beside me, smoke curling from the end of his wand.

I nodded numbly as we watched the two who had been killed being covered with manifested sheets. Beyond them, a graying magic-user stooped to recover his wand. I watched him closely, wondering if he was Marlow, my father.

"Are you two all right?" Connell asked.

"I'm fine," I said, turning to face him. James grunted a similar sentiment. I looked up at the space where the portal had stood moments before. "Is it closed? Can he come back through?"

"It's sealed tight," Connell assured me.

A horrible thought hit me. "By coming back here, did I let him through?"

"Any passage creates a temporary soft spot in the membrane between our worlds, but that's not your fault, Everson. Lich's power is growing such that he'll soon be able to come and go at will."

Well, that part is definitely *my fault,* I thought sickly, remembering the triumph I'd felt when I destroyed what I'd thought was Lich's book. Connell gripped my shoulder and lowered his gaze to mine. A layer of perspiration made the faint scars stand out from his face.

"We're at war, Everson. The most important one we'll ever wage. We can't agonize over every battle. That may sound heartless, but it's the reality. What matters is that you know the truth and that you're here." He clapped my shoulders firmly. "And you've brought reinforcements."

I nodded, still not convinced I hadn't screwed everything up. "This

is James Wesson," I said. "James, Connell."

As they shook hands, Connell said, "We followed you some years ago."

James gave him a suspicious look while my own brow creased in question. Then I remembered the Front's ability to tap into the demonic realm. Like with Tabitha, they must have had a line to the demon who had taken possession of James when he was a teenager.

"And you already know this one," I said, cocking my head toward Tabitha, who had just descended from a tree. She stalked toward us, a "what the fuck have you gotten me into?" look souring her face.

"Tabitha," he said, "I'm Connell. Welcome."

She muttered something about not having eaten a decent meal in days.

"Come," Connell said, already striding from the clearing. "Let's return to the palace. There's much to do and not much time."

I started to sheath my sword before remembering my staff had disappeared into the portal with Lich. *Damn.* I slid the blade through my belt instead and hurried to catch up to Connell and the others.

WHILE JAMES WAS TAKEN to a dining room for a late dinner, Connell escorted me back to the infirmary. "You're tainted with Whisperer magic," he explained. "Not to the extent as before, but it's in you."

"Probably during my exchange with Chicory—I mean, Lich," I said, remembering how, among other things, he'd made me see my flight itinerary as a packing list.

Connell nodded. "There's no shame. It's powerful magic."

"How about James?" I asked.

"He's fine, but your cat was infected. Her cleaning will be quick."

Lich must have retrieved Tabitha from my apartment on his way back to the safe house and used magic to convince her she'd never left, that she'd tended to me in my catatonic state. I removed my shirt and lay in my former bed. Arianna entered with a steaming basin of healing water.

"Welcome back," she said with the warmth of a mother. I noticed a thin tension around her eyes, though. Connell wore the same tension, but it was in the lines of his jaw.

"The situation with Lich," I said. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"It's urgent," Connell said. "Once Arianna finishes, we're going to hold council to discuss the situation. In the meantime, I'd like to hear what happened out there, from your departure to your return."

I started telling them. When I got to my trip in Romania, I described the condition in which I'd found Lazlo's body. I told them

what Lazlo had said, including his request that I take his hair.

"That may help us find Lich's glass pendant," Connell said, then frowned. "Lazlo fought in the war against the Inquisition, but he wasn't a member of the Front. Your grandfather was very careful about who he selected. There were undoubtedly many good and powerful magic-users who never knew the true nature of the Order until it was too late. Your grandfather felt awful about that, but he feared that the larger the resistance, the greater the chance someone would undermine it from within. With so much at stake, he kept the resistance small."

"Makes sense," I said.

"What happened then?" Arianna asked.

I described the attack by the shadow creatures as well as by Olga's father later that night, drawing comparisons to the attacks James told me had happened near Elsie's former home.

"You're right," she said as she set damp towels over my injuries, the towels' warm, healing water drawing the Whisperer magic from my system. "The shadow creatures use the portals between the fallen magic-users and the domain of Dhuul to spread fear and madness. The effects are local, but that will change when the portal to Dhuul is complete."

"It's already changing," I said, telling them about the situation in the city.

"Then he may be closer to completing the portal than we feared," Connell said.

As Arianna incanted softly over me, I finished my account with the confrontation with Chicory at the safe house and why I'd become convinced he was Lich. The room wavered over their nodding heads. My eyelids grew heavy. As Connell's and Arianna's forms began to blur, I saw something I had received subtle hints of but never put together.

I'll be damned, I thought blearily.

Following our confrontation with Lich, I had watched the other men of the Front, especially the older ones. I had sized them up, studied their eyes, the angles of their faces, all the time ignoring the man beside me. Now, I could see it clearly in his fading stance, so similar to my own.

Connell is Marlow, I thought as I drifted off.

Connell is my father.

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I was awakened by an automaton removing the towels from my body. The room was dark save for the two moons glowing through an open window. I sat up on the edge of the bed and inhaled through my nose. I had been cleansed, the Whisperer magic purged from my system.

The male automaton handed me my shirt.

"Thanks," I said before I could catch myself. I was talking to a magic-imbued machine. *And thank God*, I thought, thinking of the automatons I'd decapitated and gutted on my first visit to the Refuge, believing them the enemy. Those could have been members of the Front. Or my father.

"I'm to take you to the council meeting," the automaton said.

"Okay."

I finished dressing and followed the automaton from the infirmary room. We walked down handsome stone corridors and climbed several stairways. As the automaton's gears whirred quietly, the revelation I'd had before falling asleep spun through my thoughts. I felt both a short-breathed excitement to see Connell and a deepening anxiety. What did you say to a father you'd never met? *Hey, Pops, how's it going? We should, you know, go fishing sometime?*

Before long we arrived in the altar room on the top level, the same room where I'd seized what I'd believed was Lich's book. Whisperer magic polluting my senses, the room had appeared evil then, with its gunked-up statue pillars and foul pool. Now, it appeared grand.

Around the room, the massive statues of the nine First Saints gleamed marble-white, their hewn forms and faces speaking to power and wisdom. The raised pool at the room's center was still long and rectangular, but its water was deep blue and lined in handsome stones. More than twenty magic-users sat around the pool, including James, who was easy to pick out with his cowboy hat.

Connell and Arianna sat on the pool's far side in robes. My heart gave a hard double thud when Connell raised his eyes to mine. "Have a seat, Everson," he said, indicating a place across from him.

I settled in beside James.

"Too bad you missed dinner," James whispered. "They had a killer

spread."

"Tabitha must have been in seventh heaven," I muttered, imagining her in a food coma on a plush bed somewhere.

"She could barely walk afterwards," James affirmed.

I peered around. The other members of the Front were men and women of varying ages and races, some recruited by my grandfather, no doubt, others born and trained within the Refuge. I considered how remote the highest echelons of the Order had always felt to me. Now, for all intents and purposes, I was sitting among them.

Connell stood. "The situation is more dire than we feared," he said. "Though our efforts slow Lich's progress, they cannot staunch the outflow of Whisperer magic. That magic is pouring into the world, beginning the dissolution, a process that will gain momentum as it deepens and spreads. Lich has only to bide his time, but he appears intent on hastening that process."

"How so?" a woman asked.

"When Lich was forced from the Refuge earlier tonight, he took Everson's staff with him," Connell said. "I believe that was intentional. The staff's magic acts as a beacon. He's taken the staff to where he's building his portal to Dhuul, a parallel realm, not unlike the Refuge."

"I've been there," I blurted out. "Lich transported me there earlier tonight, or at least my astral form. He was preparing to claim my soul." For the benefit of the other magic-users, I described what I had seen.

Connell nodded gravely. "It is Lich's home. It's where he's most potent. And he plans to lure us there to destroy us and complete his work. Perhaps it is his way of getting the last laugh—using the souls of those who resisted him to finish the portal to his master."

I considered how the power possessed by those in this room would be greater than the remaining magic-users in the world. It wasn't a stretch to think their souls could accomplish Lich's objective the instant he claimed them.

"So what do we do?" a young-looking man to my right asked.

"What we must," Connell said. "We fight him there."

My body broke out in a sweat as I recalled the nightmare realm. The creatures going up and down the stairway that spiraled into the pit had seemed endless. And the whispers… If we didn't fall to Lich or the creatures, we'd be seduced by Dhuul's magic.

"He's confident," Connell went on. "Perhaps overconfident. Not only does the staff enable us to track him, he has lowered the defenses to his realm, where he likely keeps his glass pendant. Nothing prevents our passage. This is the first time he's given us this kind of access. It's a trap, yes. But we must use that to our advantage somehow. With time running out, we have no other choice."

I watched Connell as he spoke, the way his hands clasped behind his low back, the fingers of his right hand hooking his left thumb. The same gesture had bothered me days earlier because it was how I clasped my own hands when I lectured.

"But we've still no weapon," an older man said.

Weapon? I thought.

Connell turned to James and me. "Though it may sound like a contradiction, Dhuul requires an organizing force to reduce our world to chaos. Someone to build the portal, harvest the souls, carry out certain rites and magic. Lich is the key to Dhuul's designs, even in these last stages."

I nodded, understanding he was filling us in on something the others already knew.

"In Lich's hunger for supremacy, he made a deal with Dhuul and became an undead being. The power that sustains him lives inside a pendant protected by a rare and indestructible enchantment. Your grandfather divined as much. But through his research, he also discovered that the Elders designed a weapon to pierce any magic, no matter how powerful. The Banebrand. It was a fail-safe so that a single magic-user couldn't become invincible. Your grandfather believed Lich stole the Banebrand and then lost it, which was part of the weapon's magic: to not end up in the hands of the one wielding the abusive power."

"That's why my grandfather was collecting magical artifacts during the war," I said, remembering what the vampire Arnaud had told me. He claimed that Grandpa had used the Brasov Pact to steal from his fellow magic-users. "He wasn't stealing. He was searching for the Banebrand."

"Yes, during the war and for long after," Connell said. "That was why, while we used Elder magic from here to push back against Lich's efforts, your grandfather remained in the world. He devoted his life to finding the artifact that would destroy Lich's glass pendant and deny Dhuul access to the world."

I thought about the business trips Grandpa would frequently take, allegedly for purposes of insurance.

"I assume he never found it?" I said.

"That's what we'd like to ask you," Connell replied.

"Me?"

"There was no description of the Banebrand in the archives," Arianna said. "Only what it was designed to do. Your grandfather was able to detect and retrieve many artifacts over the centuries, but discovering their true purposes was another challenge. He spent his final years going over and over what he'd amassed. But after Lich sealed us in the Refuge, we lost contact with your grandfather.

Though he had taken possession of a familiar, our contact to that creature's realm became hazy and indistinct. Not like the line we later established to Tabitha."

I thought about the chilling voice I'd heard in Grandpa's trunk the time I'd snuck into his study.

"Did he ever say anything to you?" Connell asked.

"Say anything?" I let out an involuntary laugh. "I can probably count the number of actual conversations we had on two hands, and they had nothing to do with magic or magical artifacts." Looking back, I got the impression he'd wanted to steer me as far from the subject of magic as possible. Probably to keep me off Lich's radar. "And then he died unexpectedly," I finished.

Something flickered in Connell's eyes.

I stiffened. "Wait, it *was* unexpected, right?"

"We believe it was premeditated," Connell said.

A chill crawled down my spine. "You mean someone killed him too?" How hard would it have been to manifest a bee in the face of an oncoming driver at the moment Grandpa stepped into the street? Not hard at all. It was something even a junior magic-user could have managed.

"We believe your grandfather killed himself."

"What? Why?"

"Probably because Lich was closing in," Arianna said. "For centuries your grandfather's advantage was Lich's single-minded obsession with bringing Dhuul into the world and growing his own power. When your grandfather convinced him he could no longer contribute to the Order, Lich's interest in him faded. It was how your grandfather was able to work unnoticed for so long. It was also how he kept your mother's presence a secret. He waited until she was much older to train her to control her magic, just as he had planned to do with you. Eve was the one who insisted on acting as the courier between our realms so your grandfather could concentrate on locating the artifact. Not long after, and unbeknownst to us, Lich deduced the source of the magic that was frustrating his efforts to open the portal. He waited for the next passage into the Refuge, when the membrane would be weakest. That happened to be your mother's. He entered behind her, killing her and several magic-users before we were able to destroy his form. Once reconstituted, Lich set his power obsession aside long enough to look around. He discovered someone had been gathering magical artifacts in secret."

"And Lich started searching for him," I said, remembering the visitor Arnaud had spoken of, the man who had come asking about artifacts stolen during the war against the Inquisition.

"Your grandfather persisted in his work for as long as he could,"

Connell said, “but when Lich got too close… You see, Lich would have performed a mind flaying, something your grandfather couldn’t have resisted. Any and all information would have passed to Lich. That your grandfather ended his life before that could happen suggests he *was* protecting something.”

“Maybe just me,” I offered.

“Maybe,” Connell agreed. “But he might also have found the artifact and begun his search for Lich’s glass pendant. Did he say anything to you, anything at all? Think hard now.”

“No,” I replied, “but I do know where he was storing the artifacts.” I told them what Arnaud had shared about Grandpa making periodic visits to Port Gurney and about the basement-level vault in the bar.

Connell nodded. “He moved the artifacts several times during his time in New York. After Lich sealed us in, your grandfather tried to tell us of a new location through his familiar, but as Arianna said, the connection was poor. And the communication only operated in one direction, so we had no way to tell him we never received the information. Very good, Everson.”

“Well, before we get ahead of ourselves, Arnaud’s blood slaves broke into the vault and cleaned it out. Arnaud had a few magical items in his armory, but I turned those all over to Chicory.” Which probably explained Lich’s present confidence, I thought, wanting to kick myself.

“It’s worth investigating, anyway,” Connell said.

“But … can’t you just manifest this Banebrand weapon?” I asked. “You know, think it into being.”

“We can manifest objects,” Arianna explained, “but we must supply the magic. And the kind of magic of which we’re speaking came about through a collective effort by the Elders. It is beyond us.”

I glanced around the table of magic-users. Expecting to be met by the stern, judgmental faces I had long associated with the Order, I was surprised to find expressions of acceptance—even despite that I had destroyed the Elder book and allowed Lich into their realm twice.

You’re one of us, they seemed to be saying. *Our struggle is mutual.*

My gaze returned to Arianna and Connell. “If there’s a way to keep my return to the world from allowing Lich back in,” I said, “I’ll go to the vault and see what I can find. There were some items at the safe house, too. I can bring everything back here for you to examine.”

Arianna looked at Connell, who nodded. “Lich is waiting for us at the pit to Dhuul,” he said. “The passage back should be safe, but you’ll still need to be careful. The world is fast disintegrating.”

James stood and adjusted his hat. “Then what are we waiting for?”

“You’re in?” I asked in surprise.

“Hey, this is exactly the kind of gig I signed up for.”

I nodded, grateful for the company. When I turned back to Connell, something like pride shone in his eyes. “Excellent,” he said. “Before you depart, would you mind if I used your memory of Lich’s realm for a rendering?”

“A rendering?”

As Connell walked around the table, the water began to shift as though trying to assume shape. And then I understood. Connell wanted to create a likeness of the realm for their planning.

“Oh, yeah, yeah, of course,” I said.

I started to stand, but he gestured for me to remain sitting and placed a hand over my brow. His palm was warm with magic. I helped him by remembering the experience, the nightmare pit, the hills of fungal growth, the building opposite me. He extracted the information gently, his other hand extending toward the pool, where a three-dimensional likeness was beginning to take shape.

You know, he said in my thoughts.

Marlow, right? I answered.

That is my birth name, yes. I assumed the name Connell upon coming to the Refuge. I didn’t want to deceive you, but neither could I tell you in those first days. It would have been too much.

Probably a good thing, I agreed.

We’ll talk upon your return, he said, his voice gentle in my thoughts.

I thought about Arianna’s carefully crafted words before my first departure from the Refuge. *I’m sure you’ve been wondering about your father*, she’d said. *He visited your bedside while you slept. He is anxious to meet you and for you to meet him, but only when that is what you desire.*

Meet one another as father and son, she’d meant. Well played.

By the time Marlow removed his hand from my brow, the scene in the pool was fully rendered, the pit plunging deep into the water. While the other magic-users leaned toward it, I grasped my father’s retreating hand, a lump growing in my throat. It was all I could do to keep from bawling.

Without realizing I was going to, I said, “I missed you.”

He gave my hand a firm squeeze.

“I missed you, too, Everson.”

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James and I arrived back in the basement we had fled only hours before. A miasma of death and magic clung to the darkness: the remnants of Lich's presence. James beat me to a light invocation.

"Illuminare."

Silver light swelled from his wand and reflected from the sunglasses he'd slipped on. I reached out with my wizard's senses, scanning the basement and house. "I'm not picking up anything," I said, "but he's cloaked his magic before. Every inch of this place could be booby trapped."

I cast through a wand Marlow had given me as a replacement for my staff and watched the light it emitted harden into a protective shield. From inside his own shield, James shook his head in disbelief.

"Goddamned Chicory," he muttered.

"Yeah, I'm still getting used to the idea too."

I held out my sword as we made our way across the littered basement. I was especially wary of the mounds from which Lich-as-Chicory had summoned elementals during my training, ready for them to spring to life again. James loped past them, apparently unconcerned.

"Hey, mind slowing it down?" I whispered.

"Place is clean."

"How do you know?"

"Cause it's not his play."

"What do you mean, 'not his play'?"

James trotted up the stairs, his boots clunking loudly on the wooden steps. "You were at the meeting. Lich wins either way, he's just aiming to win big. He knows we've got no choice but to go to him. That's his play. What we do up here doesn't mean crap to the man."

"It will if we find the weapon."

James turned enough to make a skeptical face. "Really think that's gonna happen, chief?"

Hot anger flushed over my own face, but I didn't say anything. James was only voicing the obvious. Lich was acting too damned confident for there to be a weapon out there that could kill him.

Meaning he had either destroyed the weapon or made it impossible to find. But what if Grandpa's suicide had been about more than protecting me? What if he *had* wanted to hide something?

"Where to?" James asked.

We'd arrived in the main hallway, and I stood in our shifting lights for a moment. The safe house felt anything but.

"There's a trunk in the attic where he stashed some wands and weapons. I can take care of those if you wouldn't mind searching the other rooms again."

James nodded and headed off while I climbed the stairs. I readied my sword upon entering the attic, but nothing jumped out at me. My locking spell still held the trunk closed. I dispelled it and lifted the creaking lid. The items remained where and—as far as I could tell—how I had left them.

From one of my coat pockets, I drew out an enchanted sack Marlow had given me. One by one, I set the items inside, including the maces I'd used in the battle against the werewolves. If they carried any magic, even the Whisperer variety, the bag would suppress it until the items could be examined in the Refuge.

"Yo, Everson!" James called. "You might want to take a look at this."

I hurried downstairs and turned down the hallway to find the front door open. James was standing outside, arms leaning on the railing of the small front porch. Beyond him, in the direction of New York City, the sky was an evil-looking brown and orange. The fires that had sprung up in pockets around the city were spreading, just like the influence of the Whisperer.

We were running out of time.

"Did you find anything?" I asked him.

"Nothing interesting," he said in a way that made me wonder how thoroughly he'd searched. "Guess it's on to … where, exactly?"

"Port Gurney," I muttered. "Other side of the city."

James spun a set of keys around his finger. "Good thing I brought my ride, then."

James's ride was a black Trans-Am parked curbside, the firebird emblem spreading its golden wings across the hood. The inside smelled of oil. James barely waited for me to buckle in before gunning the engine and performing a squalling U. Though the car slewed sideways, I sensed he was in control. He threw it into second as the car straightened.

"Port Gurney," he said, tapping a finger against the steering wheel as though consulting a mental map. "North central Long Island? We could take the interstate up through the Bronx, avoid the city."

"Yeah, except that the rioting and fires started in the Bronx.

There's no telling what kind of shape the interstate's in now." I imagined lanes clogged with piles of burning vehicles and debris. "I think our best bet is to take the Lincoln Tunnel and go straight across to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, hope the chaos hasn't reached the center of the city yet."

James chuckled. "Rolling the dice. I like it."

The car engine rose an octave as he shifted again. Houses blurred past on the empty streets. People had either evacuated the area or locked themselves inside for the night. Before long, we were dropping into the Lincoln Tunnel and then cresting again, emerging into Midtown. Black smoke billowed past the Firebird's headlights, and I could hear sirens in the distance.

I was in the middle of wondering how Vega was faring when she paged me.

"Hey, would you mind pulling over up there," I said, pointing out a payphone. "It's Detective Vega. Probably wants an update, but she can also advise us on the best route through the city."

"Vega?" James said, easing up to the curb. "You mean that Puerto Rican mamma? Talk about a hot ticket." He grinned at me in a way that made me wonder whether Vega's eye roll from earlier had meant more than just James being an arrogant ass. Had he tried to hit on her?

"Hey, let's keep it professional," I said, a knot twisting in my gut.

He showed his hands. "I just call 'em like I see 'em."

"Well, she's a friend, all right? A … good friend."

His grin broadened. "How good?"

"Just…" I felt my face warming over. "Just drop it."

Flustered, I got out of the car. Breathing through my shirt collar to filter the acrid smoke, I made my way to the payphone, pushed in two quarters, and punched Vega's number. A pair of helicopters batted past.

"It's Everson," I said when she answered.

"What do you have?"

"The perp is Chicory," I said. "Not Marlow. Not my father."

The relief at being able to say that washed through me like a strong surf. I was still adjusting to the idea that Marlow—a good and powerful wizard—*was* my father. If only the timing had been better.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"West Midtown, south of Forty-second." I filled her in on where we were going and why. "Are we okay driving straight to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, or should we try another route?"

"You should be all right if you hurry," she said. "There are rioters all along Forty-second Street, and they're moving south. Another group is coming up from Gramercy." I could actually hear them:

shouts and screams punctured by the sounds of things breaking. I could also hear the strain in Vega's voice.

"How's the NYPD holding up?" I asked.

"We don't have enough officers to contain them. The rioters are charging the cordons and breaking through. We've tried gas, rubber bullets, real bullets. Nothing's deterring them. And the one's we've hauled in are going absolutely nuts. Budge is asking the president for National Guard troops, but I'm starting to wonder if *that* will be enough. Croft … whatever's happening out there, it's starting to affect normal people."

I remembered the aging woman in the pants suit at the gas station, the way her pupils had seemed to flatten as she lowered the lighter toward the pool of gasoline…

"Once we find the Banebrand weapon, we're going to the source," I promised her.

"And that will end this?"

I considered the odds: venturing into Lich's turf, where he was expecting us, surviving long enough to find his glass pendant and destroy it—all assuming, of course, we obtained the Banebrand weapon first. So, a thousand to one? Ten thousand to one?

"Only if we succeed," I answered honestly.

I waited for Vega to ask me the likelihood of that success, but she only blew out her breath. I glanced back at the car and caught James puffing a joint. I turned up a hand and mouthed, *The hell are you doing?* He smirked and shot me with a finger pistol.

"I should let you go then," Vega said.

"Is your son someplace safe?"

"He's at the apartment with Camilla."

She hadn't really answered my question, but I picked up the undercurrent of worry. Her apartment was too close to the city, the chaos.

"We'll swing by on our way back," I said. "Check in on them."

"No, Croft, that's not—"

"I'm not asking," I interrupted.

Behind me, James laid on the horn. When I looked, he was stubbing out the joint in the ashtray and jabbing a finger past me. I craned my neck around the phone stand. "Crap," I said. Then to Vega, "I'll call you later."

I hung up and backed away from the mob running toward us, their screams an insane squall. Windows broke in their wake; awnings burst into flames. Men and women shimmied light poles, rocking them until they crashed over the street. A hydrant burst, jetting water twenty feet into the air.

I climbed into the car and slammed and locked the door.

"Protezione," I called.

A glimmering shield grew around the Firebird, which James had already thrown into gear. He sped toward the mob, a hailstorm of bottles, concrete chunks, and other thrown objects breaking around us. A blue USPS mailbox landed on the shielded hood and tumbled over the roof. Within seconds we were close enough that I could pick out the crazed faces.

James wasn't slowing.

"Hey, wh-what are you doing?" I shouted, throwing my forearms to my face.

But instead of clunking through bodies, the car took a hard right, rear wheels screaming, and then a just as sudden left that fishtailed us the other direction. I lowered my arms to find us on a parallel street. Straggling members of the northbound mob armed with pipes wheeled toward us.

James let out a "Yee-haw!"

Without slowing, he cut around them as they tried to dart in front of the car. Pipes banged off the windows and clunked under the tires. Gunfire erupted, flashing from the shield. Twice James had to drive up onto the sidewalk to avoid hitting someone, but within another few seconds we were past the mob, their mindless screams trailing in our wake. In my rearview mirror, I watched them turn and resume their assault on the street and buildings.

"Good God," I muttered. "It's like Zombieville out there."

"So seriously, man," James said, shifting into a higher gear. "What's up with you and Vega?"

I looked over at him. "Me and Vega?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I have an idea, but now's not really the time." I flinched as James squealed onto a street with a new wave of rioters, slammed the brakes, threw the car in reverse, and accessed the next block.

"There's no shame in it, man," he said, not missing a beat.

I relaxed my grip on the armrest. "We work together, that's all."

"But you feel something for her."

"I feel what I'd feel for anyone I worked closely with. I might even develop feelings for you some d—look out!"

More bullets flashed off the shield. James swerved to avoid a group spilling from a Thirty-fourth street subway entrance, then down-shifted and turned north.

"Naw, man, this runs deeper than that," he said. "Every time you say her name, your eyes do this thing."

"What thing?"

"This tiny shift. It's your tell. Saw it when you first brought her up at the pool hall. Didn't think much about it till a few minutes ago

when you wanted to rip me a new one. And bam, there it was again."

"Whatever," I said, my face growing warm.

He turned toward me. "Say her name."

"What?"

"Just say it, man."

"Hey, would you watch the road?" I cried.

James swerved at the last moment, avoiding a toppled light pole, then turned back to me. He made small steering adjustments without looking, his tires clunking over debris and glass. "C'mon, man, I want to see."

"Vega," I said quickly, for no other reason than to get us across Midtown in one piece.

James leaned back and laughed. "I knew it. You've totally got a thing for her."

"If my eyes did anything, it was only because you made it awkward," I stammered.

"What's the big deal? You like her. You've got good taste."

I grumbled. My eyes did a lot of things without my knowledge, apparently. *Was* I developing feelings for Vega? It had only been a month since Caroline had had her feelings for me wiped clean. I hadn't gotten over that, not yet. So how could I have a thing for Vega? And yet … I did care about her. And yeah, I looked forward to seeing her now.

"I respect her," I allowed at last.

"Respect her," James echoed. "Have you told her?"

"Told her what?"

"About your, cough, *respect* for her."

"For God's sake. Has it occurred to you that the city is literally falling apart?" As if on cue, James turned a corner and sped past a blazing building. Bricks landed on the shielded roof.

"I'm just trying to help a wizard out," he said, switching the vent setting to Recirculate as the smoke outside thickened. "You're not the smoothest number. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I'm an academic. I know that."

"My advice, then? Start simple. A casual dinner, maybe. Or drinks. See what kind of chemistry you two have outside work."

"Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we?"

"You talking about finding the Banebrand weapon?"

"Yeah, the small matter of finding the Banebrand weapon, something even you're skeptical about. Oh, and then there's the whole destroying Lich's pendant and closing the portal to Dhuul. Otherwise, yeah, we're golden. I'll go ahead and make that dinner reservation."

James shrugged. "You were the one who brought it up. I was just trying to help."

I stared at him in disbelief, but we were arriving at the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, which had to have been a record for an west-east traverse of Manhattan. Once through, we had the highways to ourselves. James shut up, thankfully, and urged the Firebird past one hundred. Other than distant pockets of fire, the destruction was nothing like what was happening in Manhattan, but that would change as the disorder spread. I imagined the world and everyone I cared for, Vega included, reduced to a mindless soup for the Whisperer to feed on.

Please let the Banebrand be in the vault, I thought.

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James steered through the empty streets of Port Gurney, the Firebird's beams sweeping past boarded-up buildings and weedy lots. A pack of feral dogs scattered ahead of us, their backward-peering faces lean and fearful.

"Sure this is the place?" he asked.

"The town took a hit when the shipping industry crashed. It's been a downhill ride ever since. There," I said, pointing out a leaning strip of buildings that made up the town's waterfront. "The name of the bar was the Rhein House." As James turned, I rolled down the window and squinted in search of a sign. A smell of seawater and sewage wafted into the car.

"I see it," James said, and took a sharp turn in front of a building on the end of the strip. The front window had been smashed, but the hand-painted letters "RH" still showed in the upper left corner of the glass.

I got out of the car and, wand and sword readied, listened a moment. Except for the wind and the slapping of the sea, the town was quiet. But something was telling me to be wary.

"Door's unlocked."

I jerked at James's voice and found him already stepping into the bar. I hurried to catch up. Glass crunched underfoot as I stepped into the orb of silver light growing from his wand. The establishment was a leaf-blown space where I imagined tables had once stood, photos from the old country adorning the sooty brick walls. A U-shaped bar took up the far side of the room, ringed by stools bolted into the wooden floor, though several were missing. I imagined Grandpa sitting on one of the stools, ordering a stein of beer, then using illusory magic to go down to the vault to add to his collection or perhaps examine the magical artifacts already there.

My gaze shifted to a corridor to the left of the bar. "Access to the basement is probably back here," I said.

James followed me into the bar's former kitchen. The stairs down were beside a cleaned-out pantry. I took a tremulous breath—why did everything important have to be in basements?—and led the way down.

The basement was a dank, concrete space. Rats skittered from the expanding glow of my wand, taking refuge among heaps of trash and old furniture. James sent a bolt after one and chuckled when it zapped the rat's hindquarters.

"I'm sorry," I said, "is this boring you?"

"Hey, just trying to keep my skills honed."

"Well, how about looking for the vault?" I snapped.

The uneasiness I'd felt outside was still swimming through my system like a harsh stimulant. I was in no mood to play babysitter. I moved from James and began scanning the walls. He took the hint and began doing the same, moving in the other direction. When we met on the far wall, he shook his head.

"Nothing," he said.

When Arnaud had told me about the vault, I'd pictured it in a wall. Maybe that was the wrong assumption.

"Vigore!" I shouted, sweeping my sword in an arc. James jumped out of the way as the heaps of refuse blew toward the staircase. Clusters of squealing rats spilled out and scattered, chasing down their former refuge. A moment later I spotted the vault door in the floor where one of the piles had been sitting. The door was made of cast iron with a lever handle.

"Looks like someone's already been in there," James remarked.

"Blood slaves," I said, sensing the residue of the old locking spell. "They must have overpowered the spell." Which had no doubt weakened with Grandpa's death, I thought. He'd probably saved his most powerful locking enchantments for the items themselves—like the vampires' Scaig Box that had held a shadow fiend. And hopefully whatever held the Banebrand.

I double-checked the door for traps before gripping the lever and giving it a hard yank. The door clunked loose and opened onto a cylinder with a metal ladder leading down.

"Hold on," James said. He cast a silver ball of light and, with a small flick, sent it down the cylinder ahead of us. A skill he must have learned during the five years of training I'd never received. About fifteen feet below, the light spread into a room of which I could only see a small section.

I climbed down the ladder first, the skin across my chest stretching tight, breaths thinning, and ducked into a bunker-like room. I turned toward the hovering ball of light, and my heart sank. Against the far wall lay a scatter of metal boxes inside which the magical artifacts had no doubt been stored. The open boxes had been picked through, if not by the blood slaves then by whomever had come after them. Gone were the wands I'd imagined, the amulets and charms and enchanted blades. All I could find among the boxes was a dagger the size of a

letter-opener.

"Think that's the weapon?" James asked.

I turned the rusty dagger around in my hand. I sensed no magic or enchantment in it. The blade's tip had bent, and the blade was dull. Was that the point? I wondered. For the weapon to appear ordinary to anyone who found it? Was the magic hidden deep inside it? I looked over the dagger once more, made a dubious face, and placed it in the sack.

"Probably not," I said.

"There's still this."

I turned to where James's ball of light was hovering above a trunk set in a corner. With its black wood and battered metal, I recognized it immediately as the steamer trunk that had once sat in Grandpa's attic study. I'd always wondered what had become of it. But as I looked at it now, I had no hope it would contain anything. The central lock was busted and both hasps open. James lifted the lid and then jumped back with a sharp holler.

"What is it?" I asked, remembering the sniveling voice I'd heard in the same trunk years earlier. But the bone-white creature that sprang out was no familiar. He perched on the edge of the trunk, bloodshot eyes flicking between us. When his pale lips began to bulge, I saw what we were dealing with.

"Vampire!" I shouted at James.

The creature sprang and rammed face-first into James's shield. He hissed and scratched at it, a ragged business shirt and slacks covering his emaciated body. And now I recognized him. The vampire was a former CEO of one of the financial firms in downtown Manhattan. I'd sat with him in Arnaud's conference room, fought alongside him against the wolves.

Grandpa's ring pulsed around my finger. I aimed it at the vampire and shouted, *"Balaur!"*

The force from the ring nailed him and, in a burst of fire, slung him into the far wall. The vampire fell to the floor and lay writhing, his face torn as though by dragon talons, smoke billowing from his body.

James and I stood over him. "So this is where you've been hiding out," I said.

"A drop," the creature groveled. "A single, blessed drop. Please. Your blood is potent, and I am so hungry."

He gripped my pant leg, but I kicked his hand away. He was one of the two former CEOs who had escaped following the battle against the city and, by the looks of it, had planned to remain in hibernation until the threat passed. He'd probably learned about the vault from Arnaud when the vampire had reclaimed the Scaig Box.

“So hungry,” he moaned.

The thing about hibernation was that the vampire emerged weak. If we had been mortals, no problem. He would have devoured our blood to the last drop and gone back to sleep. Unfortunately for him, he’d awakened to a pair of magic slingers.

“Tell you what,” I said. “You help us, and maybe we’ll help you.”

James shot me a consternated look, but I shook my head, letting him in on the bluff.

“What do you want?” the vampire moaned. The wounds I’d inflicted across his face were puckering grotesquely along the edges. His body was trying to heal them, but he lacked the regenerative power.

“Information,” I said. “You’ve been down here, what, a month? In that time, has anyone else been down here?”

“No, now feed me.”

His hand crawled toward my leg. I stepped on it. “Think harder,” I said, his fingers crunching beneath my shoe. It was cruel, but this creature had done far, far worse in his lifetime.

His scream was thin and piercing.

“One person,” he said when he’d caught his breath.

A charge went through me. “Who?”

“I didn’t see them, I was sleeping. Now let me feed, curse you.”

“But you sensed this person. What did you sense?”

I kept my ring trained on the vampire as his mouth opened and closed, fangs thirsting for blood. “Death and decay,” he panted. “Ruination. Now let me feed!”

James raised his eyebrows. “Lich?”

I’d never told Chicory about this place, but he could have picked it up from my thoughts. Either that or one of the magical items Arnaud had taken—and that I’d subsequently given to Chicory—had left a trail of some kind, one the mage was able to trace back here. Either way, Lich had beaten us to whatever had remained of the magical stash, maybe even found the weapon in question. That would certainly explain his confidence.

“Crap,” I spat.

“You promised you’d help me,” the vampire hissed. “You *promised*.”

“You’re right,” I said tersely. *“Vigore.”* The force from my blade lifted the vampire and dropped him back into the trunk. I tossed in some dragon sand after him, shut the lid with another force invocation, bound it with a locking spell, and shouted, *“Fuoco!”* The vampire unleashed a withering scream as flames burst through the seams in the trunk.

“That’s helping him?” James asked.

“Putting him out of his misery, anyway,” I muttered. “Not to mention his blood slaves.” I imagined the mortals whom the vampire had hollowed out either dying at last or regaining their humanity in the steel shipping container that held them in the city. With the way things were going, though, it felt like pulling them out of a frying pan and into the fire.

James turned from the burning trunk and peered around. “So, that’s it, I guess. No magical weapon.” He paused, head cocked as though trying to sense something. “But there *is* magic kicking around down here.”

And now I picked it up too, a shallow pulse. We followed the pulse to its source—three symbols on the back wall. The symbols had been drawn in dark red ink, and the faint magic was emanating from their lines. James parked his shades atop his head and leaned in.

“Looks like a sigil,” he said.

“It does, but I don’t think that’s what it is,” I said. “I mean, there’s magic, but it’s not coming from the symbols. It’s *maintaining* the symbols, making sure they can’t be washed away.”

“Yeah?”

And now I sensed something else. “My grandfather drew them,” I said. “It’s hard to explain, but there’s a familiarity to the magic, something I’ve felt with other items he enchanted.”

“What do the symbols mean?”

“It’s Akkadian cuneiform,” I said as I studied them more closely. “Phonograms.”

“And for us non-PhD types, Prof?”

“Sorry, they’re sounds.”

“What do they mean?”

“That’s the thing, they don’t mean anything. They’re just random syllables. *Gug-lugal-i*,” I whispered, careful not to push any power through them. “It would be like saying la-de-da in English.”

“I don’t remember anything like that from my training,” James said.

“And I don’t recognize it from my spell books.” Still, something about the symbols resonated. Not on a magical level this time, but from a more intellectual space, as though I should have known what they meant.

“We could always test them,” James said. Before I could stop him, he was repeating the sounds, releasing them as an invocation. I flinched back, hardening my light into a shield.

But after several seconds, nothing happened.

“It was worth a shot,” James said with a shrug.

“What? A shot at getting us both killed?”

“Dude, you need to relax.”

“Relax?” I could feel a vein throbbing in my right temple. “You don’t go around channeling random sounds. You had no idea what might have been stored inside those symbols.”

“Maybe something good,” he said.

“And maybe something that would have cooked us like McCrispy over there,” I said, jerking a thumb at the smoking trunk.

“Let me know when you’re done lecturing.” James wheeled toward the ladder.

“Hey!” I grabbed his shoulder. It was as much my anger at his cavalier attitude as the hopelessness of our mission. When he spun on me, I was surprised by the intensity in his blue eyes.

“Listen, man,” he said, leveling a finger at me. “We didn’t find the weapon, and you know it. Not here, not at the house. The outing’s been a bust. Which means it’s time to start rolling the dice, hoping to hell we get lucky. And if that involves testing out random sounds, then yeah, that’s what I’m gonna do. I’m not gonna sit around, waiting to be eaten by what’s-his-name.”

“Dhuul,” I said.

“Whatever. We done here?”

I stayed glaring at him, but he had a point. “Just give me a head’s up next time, all right?” I said with a sigh.

James dropped his shades over his eyes and climbed the ladder, his orb floating up above him. I turned back toward the small room to glance it over and read the symbols a final time. Why had Grandpa written them? Why would he have wanted them to endure? And where had I seen them before?

Gug-lugal-i.

Repeating the syllables silently, I followed James up the ladder.

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By the time we reached Brooklyn, the fires had spread. We'd had to detour twice thanks to roving mobs and entire sections of highway in flames. Our argument back in the vault felt petty now, a sentiment James seemed to share. We mostly rode in silence until I mentioned needing to stop at Vega's to check on her son and sitter. James nodded, and I directed him through the streets of Williamsburg until he was pulling up in front of her apartment building.

I stepped from the car and squinted into the blowing smoke. The street was quiet, but I could hear the chaos mere blocks away. Vega's son and sitter wouldn't be safe here much longer.

"C'mon," I said to James.

He finished casting a shield spell around his car and caught up to me at the building's front steps. I looked up and down the steel monster of a front door. "Damn, forgot about that," I muttered.

When James started to raise his wand, I stopped him. "Breaking the lock will get us inside, but it will also make the residents more vulnerable."

I was considering what to do when I heard the bolts turning. A lucky break. I stepped back as the door opened and a woman wearing a crooked headscarf slipped out. I caught the door before it closed behind her.

"You should go back in," James said to the woman. "It's too dangerous out here."

When the woman turned toward us, I recognized her as Tony's sitter. "Camilla?" I said. "Where are you going?"

She gestured absently. "I go … I go…"

"Camilla," I said, taking her by the shoulders. "Where's Tony?"

"Tony?" Her expression was vacant, her pupils flattening like I'd seen in the eyes of the woman at the gas station. Shit. Camilla was falling under the influence of Whisperer magic.

I pulled her back into the building, shorted the magnetic lock on the glass door inside, and with James following, climbed the steps to Vega's floor. Camilla complied, occasionally mumbling something in Spanish. I just hoped to hell she hadn't turned violent yet. When we reached Vega's apartment, the door was open. I handed Camilla off to

James.

"Tony!" I called, making a quick circuit of the apartment. The boy was nowhere in sight. Panic pumped through me. Though I'd only met Tony twice, I felt a responsibility toward him. In part because I'd imperiled him, but largely because he was the most important thing in Vega's world.

"Tony!" I called again.

From back in the kitchen, I could hear James trying to coax the boy's whereabouts from Camilla, but her responses weren't even in Spanish anymore. She was just babbling. Not good.

"Tony, it's Everson Croft. I'm a friend of your mother's."

I heard a spring squeak in Vega's bedroom and returned to find Tony's curly head peering from underneath the bed. "Mr. Croft?" he asked. When he squirmed all the way free, I was there to lift him up.

I looked him over to make sure he was all right. "What happened?" I asked.

He cinched my neck with both arms. "She stopped making sense," Tony whispered. "Started picking at her arms and saying strange things, screaming at nothing." At that moment, Camilla screamed from the kitchen. Tony flinched and squeezed me tighter. "Like that," he said.

I held him another moment before setting him on the edge of the bed. "I want you to stay here, okay?"

He nodded uncertainly. "You gonna help her, Mr. Croft?"

"I'm going to try."

I entered the kitchen to find Camilla sitting in a chair, bound by silver cords of energy. A muzzle of energy covered her mouth, silencing her screams. "She started flipping out," James said, "scratching herself."

I looked at the bloody jags down both her arms. Her pupils were nearly flat lines now. I thought of the woman at the gas station again. Her eyes had looked exactly the same, but when that pothead had slung his arm around her, she'd seemed to snap out of it, her pupils dilating again. I hesitated on that image, remembering the smoke drifting from the guy's long hair and jacket.

I suddenly remembered something James had told me.

"When Chicory last visited you," I said to him now, "you told me he mashed his thumb between your eyes."

"Yeah?"

"But nothing happened," I said.

"Nothing I could feel."

"Do you have any more of that stuff you were smoking earlier?"

"Yeah, but … you really think now's the time?"

"Go ahead, light it up. You said you were high when Chicory

stamped you, right? I think there's something in cannabis that throws off Whisperer magic. That's why you were never affected." James was patting his pockets now, and I gestured for him to hurry. At last he found the half-smoked joint, lit it with his wand, and took a few uncertain puffs.

"Blow it on her," I said.

James leaned down and released a stream of smoke that broke against Camilla's muzzled face. We both stood back and watched. After several seconds, her face relaxed, pupils returning to their spheroid shapes. She blinked several times and looked around in confusion.

"Release her," I said.

James flicked his wand, and the muzzle and bindings dissolved.

"Mr. Croft?" she said, rubbing a wrist. "What are you doing here?"

"What happened, Camilla?" I asked.

"I … I don't know. I watching T.V. with Tony and then … I must fall asleep. I wake up here."

"But you feel all right?"

"Sleepy. But yes, I feel all right."

"Keep an eye on her," I said to James, and picked up Vega's phone and dialed her cell.

"Camilla?" she asked when she answered.

"No, it's Everson," I said. "I'm at the apartment. Tony's fine."

"Thank God," she breathed. "No one was answering the phone."

"Listen, I think we've found a way to control the mobs."

"Really? How?"

"Has the Narcotics Division made any marijuana busts lately?"

"Marijuana busts?"

"And I mean big, as in bales of the stuff. You're going to need as much as you can get your hands on."

"What are you talking about?"

"Listen, I only have a few case studies to go on, but I believe there's something in cannabis that alters brain chemistry, changes it in a way that doesn't let the bad magic take hold. Makes the insanity go away. If you can get it in the air, light it, and drop it over the city…"

"You're asking me to fumigate New York City with pot smoke?"

"It's a temporary solution until we can tackle the problem at the source."

"Hold on," Vega said. I heard her shout something into the mass of voices around her. When she came back on, she said, "I got some funny looks, but the wheels are in motion. They're desperate."

"Good."

"How's it look around there?" she asked.

I peered down through the security bars of the nearest window.

The mobs were arriving on the block. Several floors down, a window shattered. Fires blazed from parked cars. James's car was surrounded, the mob trying to bang their way through the glimmering shield.

"Could be worse," I said, which was never a lie. "But listen, I'm going to have James stay here to look after Tony and Camilla. Problem is, that leaves me without a ride. Any chance the NYPD could send a chopper?" There was no chance of driving back through the city now.

"Consider it sent," Vega said, no hesitation. "They'll pick you up on the roof."

"Thanks." I almost ended the call there. "Hey, listen. If for some reason I don't, you know, make it back, I just wanted—"

"Shut up, Croft. I'll see you soon."

Despite everything, I smiled.

"Sounds good," I said.

AIR BLASTED beneath the glare of landing lights as the chopper set down on the apartment roof. James had agreed to stay behind, as much to keep Tony and Camilla safe as to give the city a wizard presence, someone Vega could call if new issues arose. James's ready acceptance of the role suggested he didn't think he would have been much help in the fight against Lich. I knew the feeling because I was thinking the same thing about myself.

I climbed into the back of the chopper and strapped myself in.

The woman pilot turned to face me. "Where to?" she shouted.

"Gehr Place in New Jersey," I shouted back. "You can set me down in the cemetery across the street."

She nodded, replaced the cup over her ear, and lifted off. When the helicopter cleared the surrounding rooftops, it batted west, through smoke and toward the apocalyptic scene that was Manhattan.

Welcome to the End of the World Tour, I thought. *Sponsored in part by Everson Croft.*

It still killed me that I had been manipulated into destroying the Elder book. As I looked over the spreading flames, I struggled for how I might have seen through the artifice, done something different. My hands balled into helpless fists. The copilot, a young man, turned around. "You the one who said we should dust the city with pot smoke?"

I nodded tiredly and awaited the inevitable punchline.

"Department thought it was crazy," he shouted. "So they tested it out on a group they'd arrested earlier. Filled their holding cell with smoke. Know something? It calmed them right down." He smiled wide

enough to reveal his crooked lower teeth. “I believe you’re onto something.”

I nodded back, but the drug wasn’t a permanent fix. Something told me that as the Whisperer magic strengthened, it would overpower whatever blunting effect the cannabis was having—no pun intended. Which meant we couldn’t fail. Despite what James had said in the vault, I’d managed to hold on to the remote hope that Lich had overlooked something, that one of the items I’d dropped in the magic sack was the weapon that would destroy his pendant.

The key was in the syllables Grandpa had left behind: *Gug-lugal-i*.

Minutes later, the helicopter set down in the cemetery, both officers wishing me luck. I waved as they lifted off again, and I ran down the street to the safe house. From overhead, I had marked the mobs’ progress by the fires. They hadn’t pushed this far into Jersey yet, but they’d be here soon enough.

At the front door of the safe house, I stopped to make sure Lich hadn’t returned. I sensed nothing. That disturbed more than relieved me. He had made no effort to stop us, which suggested he hadn’t needed to.

I made my way down to the basement and stood in the casting circle.

Within moments, the wooden rafters and earthen floor disappeared, and I was standing in the moonlit clearing in the Refuge. “How did it go?” Marlow asked. He was alone this time.

“We took what we could find,” I said, holding up the sack. “A few items at the house, and one at the vault in Port Gurney. An old dagger. Unfortunately, the vault had been raided. And it sounds like Lich went down there as well. But there were some Akkadian syllables my grandfather had drawn on a wall: *Gug-lugal-i*. Does that mean anything to you?”

Marlow repeated the syllables as though testing their power. “It’s not a sound I’m familiar with, no.”

My heart sank. If one of the most powerful magic-users didn’t know what it meant, who would?

Marlow accepted the sack and beckoned for me to walk with him.

“And James?” he asked.

“He stayed behind to help out in the city. That was sort of an executive decision on my part. I hope that was all right.”

“A good decision,” Marlow said.

I looked over at him. I’d become so conditioned to being berated by the magical society to which I thought I’d belonged that being commended was almost jarring. And coming from my father…

“How does it look up there?” he asked.

“Honestly? Bad and getting worse.” I described the scene going

and returning. “But through a series of, um, happenstances, James and I discovered that cannabis frustrates the effect of Whisperer magic.”

“Cannabis,” Marlow repeated reflectively. “We’ve been working on various spells and potions as a prophylactic against Dhuul’s influence, but that’s not an ingredient we’d considered.”

“Its effect may only be temporary.”

“That may be all we need,” Marlow said.

He closed his eyes and a vibratory energy moved around him. We were emerging from the forest and entering the plain. The rocky hill and palace rose out ahead of us, backlit by the twin moons. The serenity was as much a shock to my system as the chaos had been only minutes before. To fill the silence, I asked, “Are you going to miss this place?”

Marlow opened his eyes again and smiled faintly. “A part of me will, yes. It’s been my home for centuries now. But the point of coming here was never to stay. It was to defeat Lich so we could return to the world and resume the important work of the Order.”

His robe whispered as he walked. Something told me he could have transported us to the palace—we were in a thought realm, after all—but that he had wanted to steal a few minutes alone with me.

“How old was I when I left here?” I asked.

“Barely one. In fact, your grandfather spirited you out right before Lich sealed us from the world. This was shortly after Lich’s attack. Your mother and I had discussed what we’d do if he ever found our refuge while you were still young. We decided you would be placed in your grandparents’ care. Your grandfather was very powerful, and your grandmother, though not a full-blooded magic-user, had some veiling spells in her repertoire. With Lich’s focus largely in parallel realms, we felt you’d be safest with them.”

“Wait, my *grandmother* was a magic-user?” I rifled through my memories. She had never demonstrated any magical abilities—none that I could remember. But veiling spells were often subtle.

“And a wonderful cook, too,” Marlow said. “I’ll never forget her blueberry cobbler topped with homemade ice cream.”

I smiled. That had been one of my favorites, too. But I caught a note of loneliness in Marlow’s voice.

“You still miss her,” I said. “My mother.”

“Every day, Everson.”

I wanted to ask him what she was like, but the question felt strangely personal. Like I’d be prying, even though he was my father. *My father.* I still couldn’t get my head around the idea that this man strolling beside me was him. No longer an idea, no longer a lie, but a living, breathing presence.

“How did you meet?” I asked.

“Your grandfather introduced us on Eve’s first visit to the Refuge. She was preparing to take over his role. He asked me to give her a tour of our realm, explain what we were doing, that sort of thing. I was exhausted that day. I’d been up late the night before doing spell work and frankly wasn’t in much of a mood to play guide. But your mother had this effect on me—call it magic,” he said with a laugh, “as though our auras were in constant resonance. By the end of her visit, I felt more … *alive* than I had in a long time. My efforts here, which had taken on the dull weight of drudgery, assumed fresh purpose. You have to remember, we’d been working against Lich for hundreds of years and couldn’t claim much more than a stalemate. But with your mother’s arrival, the work felt brand new. She restored me.”

We’d come to the staircase leading to the palace, and now he stopped. “That went double when you arrived, Everson. A new life is a growing system of order. In your case, one that was very precious to me. In your eyes—eyes already showing the first glimmers of insight and intelligence—I beheld the true horror of what Lich could do. Or more aptly, what he could undo. All so Dhuul could feed on the dissolution and Lich could know immortality.”

I nodded, not sure what to say.

“I wanted to be there with you, Everson. Through your questions, your struggles, through the lies and distortions that followed. But know that all this time, you’ve been with me. In my thoughts, my work.”

Tears stood in Marlow’s eyes. For the first time since realizing he was my father, it felt natural to hug him. We embraced solidly, every so often clapping the other’s back. I didn’t want to be anywhere else. When at last we separated, moisture stood in my eyes as well. I blinked it back.

“So is it time to save the world?” I asked.

“We’ll need to depart for Lich’s realm shortly,” he said.

For the first time it occurred to me that I might not be included in the plans, that I would be considered too junior. But I was the one who had destroyed the Elder book. I was the one who had allowed Lich into the Refuge—twice. Besides that, I was Eve and Marlow’s son. I was a member of the Front. I was about to say as much, but my father was already nodding.

“Yes,” he said, “we’ll need you too.”

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When Marlow and I arrived in the altar room, Arianna and the rest of the Front were already there. The model of Lich's realm remained in the water, the pit dropping like a narrow whirlpool. The members of the Front stood around it, eyes closed. I sensed a unifying force moving among them, conjoining them.

"A guiding principle of the Order," Marlow said to me, "is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

I thought about the old Order and its practice of keeping us segregated.

At the sound of Marlow's voice, several members of the Front separated and made room for us. As we took our place at the pool's edge, the strange force seemed to invite me to become a part of the magical collective. I flashed back to my nightmare of a gold-faced mage urging me to join the cluster, to become one. *Ever*son, he'd whispered, emphasizing the *son*. But this wasn't the same feeling. I wasn't being compelled or even coaxed. I had a choice.

I looked around at the statues of the great Saints. Four men and five women, rock-solid purpose in their frames and steady gazes. Beyond the head of the pool stood the statue of Saint Michael, the line to which all magic-users belonged. As I studied the image of my ancestor, I couldn't help but feel he was looking back at me, asking if I was ready.

When I nodded, I imagined him returning the gesture.

In a dizzying flash, my mind opened. The lone planet I had been zoomed out to become part of a revolving galaxy. Power hummed around my prism in a giant corona, but it didn't overwhelm me. That power was being contained by the collective and the specters of those who had come before.

"The world is fast succumbing," Marlow announced, "meaning Lich's thousand-year project is almost complete. By the First Saints, we unite in a common purpose. To destroy Lich, close the portal to Dhuul, and restore the Order to the purpose for which it was originally created."

No one spoke, but I felt the collective power deepen and move through me.

“Lich has placed Everson’s staff here,” Marlow said, pointing his wand. In the pool, a light glimmered on the side of the pit opposite the fortress. It was the same spot Lich had taken me to. “Nothing stands between us and it,” he continued. “Lich’s plan, no doubt, is to bait us in and set the spawn of Dhuul upon us. There are many, yes, and Lich is counting on them to overwhelm us so he may claim our souls and complete his portal.” My gaze shifted to the horrid creatures climbing from the pit. “But thanks to a discovery by Everson, we’ve concocted a potion that will resist their influence, hold them off longer.”

Hold them off? I thought to myself. *That doesn’t sound like a plan for victory.*

“While we are thus engaged, Everson will steal into the keep, find the glass pendant, and destroy it.”

“Me?” I stammered in alarm.

“Lich’s attention will be on us,” Marlow explained. “Indeed, he will be salivating at the prospect of claiming the collective soul of the resistance and turning it to his own purposes. You haven’t enough power to interest him. You’re beyond his care. You’ll also have this.” An automaton entered, holding the robe of John the Baptist. It had been repaired, its cloaking energy coursing through the fibers once more. The automaton held the robe toward me.

“The Banebrand,” I said, accepting the robe, “are you telling me I found it?”

“I’ve inspected the collected items for Whisperer magic. They’re clean, but there isn’t time to examine them more thoroughly,” Marlow said. “The only way to know whether one is the Banebrand will be to try them all.”

I thought of the collection of items in the sack: wands, amulets, the sorry-looking dagger. “If we don’t have the weapon, we can withdraw through the portal to regroup, right?” I asked.

Marlow shook his head. “Lich won’t allow it. This will be our one chance.”

I looked around at the other members of the Front, men and women who would be sacrificing themselves so that I might accomplish the impossible. Like the statue of Michael, though, their gazes were steady, resolved. They frigging believed in me. I fought the urge to look away from them. Instead, I centered myself in the collective until their resolve became mine.

“What happens after I destroy the glass pendant?” I asked.

“That will depend on Dhuul,” Marlow said. “Should he emerge before the portal fails, we will need to act. Part of our work here has been to cultivate a Word. A single, powerful note similar to that which brought the universe into being, that delivered order from chaos.

Speaking the Word will drive Dhuul back. And without Lich to hold open the portal, it will collapse in Dhuul's wake."

I sensed a thought move through the collective.

"It will destroy us as well," I said, voicing the thought. But of course it would. No one could survive the power of creation, not even through a collective. The Word would blow us apart.

Are you still willing? my father asked in my head.

The chances of returning alive had already been slim, but if we reached a point where the Word needed to be spoken, it would at least mean we had succeeded. I wouldn't be alone in my sacrifice, either. I would be with my father and the highest echelon of magic-users.

I am, I answered.

He nodded. "Arianna will remain here," he announced. "Should we succeed in our mission but fail to return, it will become her duty to locate the remaining magic-users of the world and reestablish the Order. She'll look after Tabitha as well," he said with a wink that made me smile despite the terror pounding through me.

A pair of automatons entered the room, each carrying a large goblet.

"The time is upon us," my father said. "We will drink and prepare to depart."

The automatons handed the goblets off at the end of the pool. The goblets made their way down, each member of the Front taking a sip, as though the potion was a kind of communion wine. When my turn came, I did the same. The potion was plain-tasting, but I felt its magic immediately, enveloping my mind in a protective field. I understood now that when my father had closed his eyes on our walk here, he had instructed the automatons to add an essence of cannabis to the potion.

"Don your robe," he said to me.

As I pulled the robe of John the Baptist over my head, I noted how everything had come full circle. I'd first donned the robe on my journey here, in search of my mother's killer and the book I'd been told sustained him. Both lies. Instead, I found the truth, a community, and a father. Now I would use the same robe to find and destroy the liar and help cast Dhuul from our world.

My father handed me the sack of artifacts. I took it and secured it in my belt.

"Wait a full minute after we've entered," he said. "We'll push the fight to the edge of the pit. That will give you ample space when you come through. But you must make your way to the fortress quickly."

"I understand," I said.

He squeezed my shoulder, gray eyes peering into mine. "I'll see you there."

He stepped onto the edge of the pool with the others. Power

emanated from the ends of their wands. As though by unspoken agreement, they dropped in at the same time, the pool swallowing them without a splash. Light flashed from the water, and then only Arianna and I remained.

"Do you have anything to give me this time?" I asked with a shaky laugh, referring to the glass vial she'd given me before my first departure.

I was cloaked now, and it seemed to take her eyes a moment to focus on mine. "Not this time, no," she said. "The only way, Everson, is to trust you have everything you need."

I could feel my analytical mind wanting to discount the words as empty feel-goodism, but she was right. At this point, that was the only way. I tightened my belt and adjusted my grip on my sword. Then I climbed onto the edge of the pool, my heart booming like a base drum.

I could feel Arianna behind me, watching.

"Thank you," I said, and dropped into the water.

I EXPERIENCED a stomach-dipping feeling of falling. Something rammed into my side—the ground, I realized—and I began to roll, black toadstools breaking around me. I finally came to a stop at the bottom of a hill. As my vision steadied, I stood and got my bearings.

Away to my left, the pit to Dhuul belched bile-green fumes. Marlow and the other magic-users advanced on it, bright energy flashing from their wands. Shadow creatures were emerging from the pit to meet them, inky energy spewing from their tentacled forms.

Take your staff, a voice sounded in my head—my father's. *It's clean.*

I looked around and spotted the slender wood staff several feet ahead of me. I retrieved it and then cleared an area in the toadstools. In the spongy earth, I etched a casting circle and filled it with copper filings. In the center of the circle, I placed the strands of Lazlo's hair, aimed my staff at them, and incanted. Light swelled from the opal as it absorbed the hair's essence.

Seconds later, the staff kicked in my hands and pulled me toward the pit, which made sense. The lion's share of Lazlo's soul was somewhere inside the portal, maintaining it. But by concentrating into the spell, I could feel another force splicing from the main pull. And that force was directing me to the keep on the opposite side of the pit, directing me to the glass pendant where the rest of Lazlo's soul was being held to give Lich life.

It was here.

I glanced over at the battle. The shadow creatures had surrounded

the magic-users but were keeping their distance as white magic burst from wands. Flesh-colored bats shrieked and circled above. In the collective mind, I could feel the magic-users' straining efforts. I had to hurry.

Eyeing the plain around the pit, I chose my route. With the creatures' attention on the magic-users, and the robe of John the Baptist to hide me, I set off, staying well away from the action. I checked myself as I went. The small sack of magical artifacts swung from my belt while my coin pendant did the same over my chest. I had my staff back, my sword now sheathed inside it.

The only way, Everson, is to trust you have everything you need.

Holding to Arianna's words, I rounded the pit, jumping oozing rivulets that coursed from the hills and flowed toward the abyss. The battle raged like a growing storm behind me, while across the pit, the keep loomed larger and larger. It was square-shaped and forbidding, walls black with mold. A large door stood in the front, its portcullis raised like an upper set of fanged teeth.

Okay, he's left the front door open. Overconfidence or an obvious trap?

Certainly he had to have something defending his keep. No sooner than I'd begun considering what that could be, my right leg plunged through the toadstools. I tried to throw myself backward, but my forward momentum was too strong, and I plunged the rest of the way into water.

Wonderful.

I resurfaced with a sputter and splashed for solid ground. When the toadstools rippled in a spreading wave, I realized they hid a large pool, one surrounding the keep like a moat. I struggled harder, but it was like trying to climb out of a break in the ice. More and more of the surface kept coming apart in chunks of toadstools. As the water dragged on my clothes and robe, I felt my magic fizzling. I kicked furiously to keep my head above the surface, but the water was different here, heavier. Desperate, I aimed my cane downward.

"Vigore," I whispered, hoping for a force to propel me from the water. But my magic was waterlogged.

I stopped scrabbling and forced a pair of calming breaths. My only option was to swim for the keep. I turned and began to breaststroke, arms breaking through the floating toadstools. The pond was deep—my feet had never touched bottom—and I didn't want to think about what might be lurking beneath me. *Just have to hope the robe is keeping me veiled.*

I was halfway to the keep when the water bulged ahead of me. My gut clenched. Something large had just passed beneath the surface. I slowed and peered around. The toadstools were rippling on all sides. *Keep going,* I counseled myself. *Have to keep going.* I resumed

swimming, eyes fixed on the front of the keep. Something brushed my leg. *Keep going.* What felt like a hand wrapped my left ankle. I kicked it away. *Keep going.*

When my knee sank into something, I nearly shouted before realizing I'd encountered semi-solid ground. I clawed my way up the pool's far shore, the foul water running off me. I peeked over a shoulder and wished I hadn't. My passage had stirred the bottom of the pond, and now leeches the size of small boats were flapping to the surface, their black bodies writhing over one another.

I scrambled to higher ground, water streaming from my hair and splattering onto the back of my hand.

But this water was bright red.

I raised the hand to my head and felt the slick skin of a leech. The creature, whose weight I had mistaken for water, extended down my back, its tail ending below my waist. Its mouth was attached to the crown of my head, sucking the life from me. I tried to peel the creature away, but it held fast. Panicked, I balled my hand into a fist and began hammering its head. It wouldn't let go. I could feel its body warming and swelling against mine, bulging with blood. White spots danced around my vision.

Not thinking, Everson, I scolded myself.

I stopped punching and dug into my pocket until I encountered the bag of salt Olga had given me. Tearing it open, I grabbed a handful of the salt and threw it over my back. The creature slapped against me. I took a second handful and ground it against the leech's head. The leech released me and flopped to the ground with a heavy thud. I staggered the rest of the way to the keep, stopping outside the portcullis. I felt faint and my legs were trembling. I'd lost a lot of blood.

I turned toward the battle that continued to flash and rage on the far side of the pit. They were counting on me, and I'd be damned if I was going to let a leech doom the mission.

I recited my centering mantra. My prism came back quickly, perhaps for the power of the collective, and fresh power crackled through me. With a whispered *"Respingere,"* I blew the excess water from me and then sized up the entrance. No wards from what I could detect. Lich must have limited his defenses to the barrier to his realm, counting on Dhuul's shadow creatures to intercept anyone who made it through. Anyway, without the Banebrand weapon, what could anyone who entered actually do?

I tested the threshold with my cane. The opal end passed cleanly through.

I reactivated the hunting spell, waited for the cane to kick in my grasp, and entered Lich's keep.

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I hadn't gone far when I began to encounter guards. The fish creatures appeared first, the same ones I'd been made to see in the Refuge when Whisperer magic had superimposed nightmares over my senses. Their large, incandescent eyes shifted wetly as they passed, their pupils flat lines.

I kept to the shadows, counting on the robe to hide me. When the creatures had gone, I moved on, the hunting spell tugging me deeper into the keep. One level up, I encountered a new variety of creature that oozed along on slug-like appendages. Blank eyes stared from gray heads without mouths.

I felt like I was walking backward along an evolutionary line. But that was Dhuul's objective, after all. To devolve everything, return it to chaos. These creatures may well have been human once.

Where are you? came my father's voice in my head.

Inside, I replied. *The pull of the hunting spell is getting stronger.*

Good, he said. *Use the power of the collective as you need to.*

I didn't like the pain in his voice. *How are you doing?*

Don't think about us, he said. *Your focus is the glass pendant.*

Before he could break away, I felt a member of the Front get buried beneath an assault of shadow tentacles. The Front was beginning to falter. I swallowed hard and broke into a run: down a corridor, up another flight of steps, the cane and the desperateness of the situation urging me on. Creatures stopped and turned, sensing my movement.

Screw 'em, I thought.

At what felt like the top level of the keep, I arrived in a room. I stopped and peered around. The space was crammed with bookcases heaped with old tomes and folios, papers spilling from them. Various writing implements, scrying devices, and spell items were scattered across tables. Chairs for writing and reading sat here and there. I picked my way further inside, half stunned.

I was in Lich's library/lab, yes, but I was also in the de facto headquarters of the Order of Magi and Magical Beings. And it wasn't the huge celestial hall I'd imagined, but a bachelor pad in need of housekeeping. My eyes fell to a half-finished letter to a magic-user

regarding some request or other she'd made. Many of my own messages would have been sent to and from this same room. I felt like I was peering behind the curtain in Oz.

My cane tugged and pointed at the far side of the room. On a corner of one of the tables, a necklace with a lamp-shaped pendant hung from a small stand. A sickly orange light glowed through the pendant's sides. *The glass pendant,* I thought in disbelief. *I've found the glass pendant.*

I glanced around. *And still no sign of Lich.*

I pulled the sack from my belt as I sped across the room. Setting the sack on the table, I reached for the glass pendant. Strong magic stirred inside it. *Of course there's strong magic*, I thought, trying to talk down my wariness. *It's sustaining Lich's life force.*

I nodded to myself and lifted it from the stand.

The pendant began to scream.

I cupped a hand over it as though it were a mouth, but the screaming persisted. "Shut up," I hissed, encasing the pendant in a shield, hoping that would mute the sound. But no luck. The alarm was magical.

I looked around wildly as footsteps slapped up the steps. The fish and slug creatures were emerging from the stairwell and entering the room, scimitars drawn. They advanced on the glass pendant, which was pulsing brightly enough to throw my shadow against the back wall.

"Vigore!" I cried, sweeping the cane toward the creatures. As the force toppled bookcases and shoved the creatures back, I reached into a pocket for the dragon sand. I scattered it in an arc and shouted, *"Fuoco!"* Flames exploded from the sand, engulfing tomes and creatures before settling into a high wall between us.

I really had to hurry now.

I dug into the sack, pulled out a wand, and aimed it at the glass pendant.

"Disfare!" I shouted. A burst of bright red energy emerged, enveloping the pendant. But when the energy dissipated, the glass faces remained intact. The pendant continued to pulse and scream.

I exhausted the wands and moved on to the maces and amulets, repeating the invocation. But though the magic in each enchanted item was powerful, none seemed to have any effect on the glass pendant.

C'mon, dammit, I thought, digging in the sack. *It has to be one of you.*

I squinted back at the flames. The fire was keeping the creatures at bay, but it would only be a matter of time before the commotion attracted Lich—unless, of course, he was already on the battlefield,

claiming souls. I was tempted to tap into the collective, to check on them, but my father was right. My focus needed to be here. I reached into the sack again.

Only one item remained: the rusty dagger.

"Please, let it be you," I whispered, and plunged the blunt blade against a glass face.

Something broke. The screaming stopped. *Holy crap—it worked,* I thought, my ears ringing in the sudden silence. But when I looked down, the pendant was intact, the glass not even scratched. It was the dagger that was in pieces.

"How unfortunate," someone said.

I wheeled to find Lich standing on the far side of the room, his back to me. The flames had been extinguished. Several of the fish and slug creatures were on the ground, burnt to a smoking crisp. The rest were arrayed on either side of Lich in a defensive formation.

"Your collaborators were counting on you," Lich said. "Now half of them are fallen while the rest hardly have strength enough to stand, including your father." A cold wind blew through the narrow window he was peering out of, ruffling his robe and shuddering my sweat-soaked body. "I'll harvest their souls in a moment, but first I want to make you an offer."

I spiked the glass pendant against the floor and tried to smash it with my heel. I grunted with the effort, but it was like trying to crush a block of granite. The magic that protected it was too strong. I called up the syllables my grandfather had left on the vault wall.

"Gug-lugal-i!" But though I drove power through them, they did nothing.

"Come now," Lich said, turning to face me. "There's no point in carrying on like that."

I looked up at him, my legs trembling with exhaustion and fear. As a last resort, I unsheathed my sword and stabbed the pendant. Lich watched me patiently, his gray, vein-mapped head canting to one side as though in pity. He signaled to his creatures to move away as he stepped between them.

"I understand your fear," he said. "When I discovered the fissure to Dhuul, when I understood his desires, I was just as revolted as you are now. He whispered of returning the world to a primordial state, of feeding on the dissolution. Horrible, horrible images, Everson."

"Yeah, so horrible that you're helping them come true," I said, giving the pendant another vain jab.

"Like I told you, his arrival was inevitable. One could either ignore that or come to the best terms possible. My siblings chose the former, leaving me to act as Dhuul's lone diplomat. Not at all what I wanted."

"Sure."

“It was a Faustian bargain, Everson, I agree. I would help deliver Dhuul into the world in exchange for the Order being spared. Understand this, though. Once Dhuul feeds on the enormous release of energy, he will leave in search of other worlds. He will leave us to rebuild *this* world, to construct new order from the chaos. Don’t you see? The Order of Magi and Magical Beings will become a godhood, Everson. We will be the Creators, the life-givers.”

With Lich’s mind warped by centuries of Dhuul’s influence, I could only imagine the nightmare world he would bring about. I peered at the horrid creatures on either side of him.

“The souls you believe I’ve sacrificed,” he said, gesturing toward the window, “they suffer now, yes, but they will soon know power they never thought possible. And all because I was willing to look on the horrible being Dhuul, and where others saw dissolution and death, I saw opportunity.”

“Opportunity for yourself.”

“For the *Order*,” he insisted. “The only entity I have ever truly served.”

“Bullshit.” I aimed the sword at him.

“I understand the enmity you feel toward me,” he said, taking another step forward. “I did take your mother’s life. Nothing I say can, or should, lessen that in your mind. But do know that when I entered the Refuge, it was to make the same appeal to them as I’m making to you now. They were only stalling the inevitable and, in doing so, prolonging the agony of the souls toiling below. The members of the Front attacked me, and I fought back.”

“And lives were lost, yeah, yeah, yeah,” I interrupted, anger spiking through me. “Do you want to know what really happened? You were the runt of Saint Michael’s children. You didn’t get the powers you thought you deserved, and so you went looking for them. You found the fissure to Dhuul, a being that could only emerge into our world if someone helped him. He promised you power. You jumped at it. Period. End of story. All this talk of making the tough choice for the Order is horseshit. Dhuul probably didn’t have to convince you of anything, either. Didn’t even have to use Whisperer magic. He simply made the offer and then let your power-hungry little mind come up with the rationalizations all on its own. You killed your brothers and sisters. *Murdered* them. Let that sink in for a second.”

Lich’s brows crushed downward. “I could destroy you now, is that what you want? Your power is undeveloped, your soul of no use to the effort, and yet I’m offering to safeguard it, to make you a god.”

“Why?” I challenged.

“Because it’s my role, Everson. I may appear different, but in many ways, I am still Chicory. I am still the one who looks after you. The

only reason I kept you in the dark—*all of you* in the dark—is because I didn't want to see you destroyed. As head of the Order, I'm responsible for you."

Something like pleading took hold in his hideous eyes, and I hesitated. Lich actually saw himself as a parental figure.

"It offended me to learn that your mother and grandfather cloaked their powers from me," he continued, "that others faked their deaths and went into hiding. It offended me deeply. If only they'd listened." His voice faltered, as though threatening to regress to the little brother he'd once been. "If only they'd *trusted* me."

I saw an opening, however slim, and lowered my sword slightly. "I know you believe Dhuul's arrival is inevitable," I said. "I know you believe the bargain you made is the only way to spare the Order, but it's not." I thought about the Word my father and the others had spent centuries cultivating. I thought about them battling Dhuul's creatures below. "Please. Release the souls from the portal, and help us cast Dhuul out. It *can* be done."

"And what would become of us?" Lich challenged.

"There's a chance we won't make it," I admitted. "But the magic-users you've watched over these years will survive. The Order will survive. Isn't that what you want?"

I was trying to appeal to his paternal instincts, and for an instant, I believed he might relent. But his jaw clenched suddenly, molars bulging through the skin of his cheeks. Dark energy stormed around him as tentacles sprang from his back. "Die then!" he shouted.

The creatures, which had been shifting and murmuring while Lich and I talked, rushed forward, scimitars flashing. I battered the monstrosities with force blasts and slashed my blade at those who came too close. I didn't hold back. If this was to be my final fight, there was no sense in conserving energy.

But as a second wave of attacks commenced, my vision began to waver. I was still suffering from the blood loss. How much longer before Thelonious came swooping in?

"The Banebrand was meant to prevent the ruination of the Order," Lich said from behind his horde. "It's ironic, then, that you and the others intended to use the weapon to bring that ruination about. To destroy the only member of the original Order strong enough to still be standing." He was no longer the father figure, but the gloating youngest child.

I grunted as I swung my sword through a fish-man's neck.

"Your grandfather found the Banebrand, yes. But he did a poor job concealing it. The weapon remained in the vault after his death. I acquired it—a handsome stiletto, I'm sure you've been wondering—and cast it into the pit. The Banebrand is no more. I cannot be

destroyed."

I refused to let his words bury my will.

Flinging the last of the dragon sand at him, I used what strength remained in me to ignite it. Red-orange fire swallowed him, but Lich stepped through the burst a moment later, unscathed. He strode from the flames and his army of creatures. I backed from his glowing eyes and writhing tentacles. Tripping over the glass pendant, I fell against the back wall.

"I cannot be killed," Lich said, "As far as you are concerned, *I* am the Death Mage."

The tentacles seized me and wrapped me around. A smell of rot and death came off them. When Lich's withered face clenched, muscles inside the black appendages bulged. I grunted as my ribs crushed around my heart and lungs. With the pain, red lights slashed over my vision.

A blast from the sword repelled him once, I thought weakly. *If I can just summon enough power…*

My sword arm was pinned to my side, but my hand and wrist were free. I cocked them up until the blade was aimed at Lich. With the breath of air I had left, I prepared to utter the invocation … and then stopped.

The stiletto Lich had recovered in the vault.

The symbols Grandpa had written on the wall and made permanent through magic.

A gift he had left me long ago.

In an instant of insight, the pieces snapped together. I wanted to laugh at the obviousness of it. Instead, I grunted as the ribs down my right side cracked in a goring line.

I know what they mean, I thought through the pain. *I know what the symbols mean.*

And with that knowledge, my sword stiffened in my grasp and began to sing in a high and powerful note. Lich's eyes canted downward. His tentacles softened and writhed, as though in distress.

I drew a choked breath and uttered, *"Vigore."*

Rose-colored fire exploded from the blade and plumed against Lich's chest. He screamed as the force sent him into a backward roll, tar-black blood spilling in his wake. I fell to the floor at the same moment he landed against the far wall. The tentacles that had been torn from his body twitched and slapped over the burning floor between us. The sword was still in my grasp, still glowing.

The creatures fled, while Lich moaned and tried to push himself upright.

"There's an ancient Hittite story," I grunted through my jagged breaths. I staggered in a circle in search of the glass pendant I'd kicked

with my heel moments before. “Known mostly to scholars … mythologists. Goes like this. Poor farmer raises prize ram. Greedy king wants ram for himself. Farmer coats prize ram in mud, then cleans and festoons common ram from his stock. King’s soldiers come and take common ram. Farmer gives prize ram to son.”

Lich sat against the far wall, a tarry pool spreading around him. I spotted the glass pendant behind a table and used a foot to drag it out by its chain.

“King never knows the difference,” I finished.

I’d been wrong in the vault. The symbols Grandpa had etched were Akkadian syllables, yes, but when that script had been adopted by the Hittites, the symbols became logograms: entire words. In this case, *gug lugal-i* meant “ram to king.” Grandpa had encoded his actions in the Hittite story. A story that, as scholars of mythology, we both knew.

I held the sword up. Fresh rose-colored light bloomed along the blade’s glinting edge. It had taken a few moments, but across the room, understanding finally dawned in Lich’s eyes. The king in this case was him; the prize ram was the Banebrand weapon. Which meant the stiletto in the vault had been a fake. The blade Grandpa had passed to me was the real item.

“N-no,” Lich stammered. “No!”

He threw his hands forward, fingers writhing. Inky black magic spewed from them and coursed across the room. But upon reaching me, the magic broke apart, killed by the Banebrand.

I positioned the glass pendant between my feet and, gripping my sword in both hands, squared my body to Lich’s. “For your crimes against the Order of Magi and Magical Beings, including the murder of my mother, Eve Croft, I sentence you to the ultimate penalty.”

“I can give you eternal life, infinite power,” he babbled. “Anything and everything you’ve ever—”

“Disfare!” I shouted and drove the blade down. The tip crunched through the glass face, and, in a blinding flash, the glass pendant blew apart. I fell against the back wall and landed hard.

I looked up in a daze as slivers of light streamed from the glass pendant in a celestial show. They were the souls Lich had entrapped. Their beauty stole my breath. In them, I saw the wrongness—the absolute wrongness—of what Lich had done. Such things were never meant to be imprisoned.

The souls encircled me on their way from the keep, healing me. And in them I felt the wisdom and power of those who had come before, all the way to Lich’s siblings: the original Order.

One soul lingered.

“Lazlo,” I whispered.

You found me, he said. *Now see that it is ended.*

The final light, Lazlo's light, streamed off, and the ruined room dimmed. The glass pendant lay in pieces beyond my outstretched legs. Beyond it, against the far wall, slumped a rotting corpse, black toadstools and mold already growing over it, consuming it. The only thing streaming from Lich's body was a dark, putrid liquid. He had no soul of his own, after all. He'd pledged it to Dhuul long ago.

The earth shook.

I pushed myself to my feet and made my way to the narrow window beside Lich's body. The pit yawned in the middle of the nightmare landscape below, but the matrix of souls that had held it open was no more. The sides were shuddering and sliding down, taking the shadow creatures with them. What remained of the Front backed from the far side of the pit, carrying the fallen.

The magic-users were too far away for me to distinguish the living from the dead.

Marlow? I called into the collective. *Father?*

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Father? I tried again, but something seemed to have disrupted my connection to the collective. The keep shuddered and rumbled around me. I spun to find cracks spreading in the walls, chunks of stone falling from the ceiling. Without Lich to sustain them, his creations were falling apart.

I fled down the stairs as a wall collapsed behind me.

"Protezione!" I called. More stones broke over the spherical shield that took shape around me. I darted and leapt my way down, bursting from the keep moments before the entire structure collapsed.

Without breaking stride, I aimed my sword behind me and shouted, *"Forza dura!"*

The force launched me like a cannon ball. I cleared the leech-infested moat, landing in the toadstools beyond. I rolled for several yards, sprang up, and stumbled into a fresh run. By the time I reached the other magic-users, I was out of breath, heart hammering. I removed the robe of John the Baptist.

Only half of those I'd arrived with remained. The bodies of the deceased lay in a solemn line.

"What happened to—?" I started to say, but several of the magic-users silenced me with fingers to their lips. They stepped apart, and I saw Marlow kneeling, facing the pit, power warping the air around him.

Joy and relief flooded through me.

"He's forming the Word," a woman whispered to me.

It took a moment for the message to register. "But I destroyed the glass pendant," I insisted. "The pit is collapsing." I looked beyond my father to where the hole in the earth rumbled and coughed.

"Dhuul is emerging faster than the pit is failing," she said.

I stopped to listen. I could hear him, the ancient being's whispers climbing like an ungodly force of nature, growing louder, more terrible. We had no choice now but to speak the Word, to repel Dhuul and collapse the hole to his realm. My father, the rest of the magic-users, me…

We would all perish.

But the world will be spared, I reminded myself. *That's what matters.*

I thought about Vega and her son and all of the good and decent people I had known. Then I thought about my mother, who had died in service to them. I thought about my grandfather, who had sacrificed himself so Lich wouldn't find the Banebrand. I watched my father, the vast pit rumbling and fuming before him, and the love I felt for him became enormous.

At last Marlow stood and walked over to us. "The Word is ready." His eyes glowed with magic. When our gazes met, he smiled and nodded. *Well done*, he was saying. *I'm proud of you.*

I nodded back, fighting to contain my emotions.

"You'll only have a moment," he said to us. "When you feel the membrane failing, Arianna will pull from the other side, but you must push. With everything you have. Do you understand?"

I looked around as the others voiced their understanding.

"Are you saying we can destroy the pit *and* return?" I asked.

"You will return," my father answered.

"You're not coming?"

His sober look told me everything. As the most powerful magic-user, he alone would speak the Word. He would unleash the impossible force that would repel Dhuul. The hope that had been swelling inside me ruptured and deflated. He held up a hand before I could say anything.

"It's the only way, Everson."

"Let me help," I said. "Maybe together we can channel the force, contain it…"

But he was already shaking his head. The hand he had raised came to a rest behind my neck. He pulled me against him. "I feel your willingness, Everson," he whispered, "but you wouldn't survive, and the sacrifice would be pointless. Arianna and the new Order will need you."

I squeezed him back, a huge knot of grief closing my throat.

After another moment he stood back, held me by the shoulders, and looked intently into my eyes. "I have to go. But I go with the joy that I finally got to see you, to know you."

His imaged blurred as I blinked back tears.

He smiled, then peered past me. "Be ready, everyone." Then to me, "Be ready."

"I … I love you," I said.

"I love you too, Everson."

With a final squeeze, he turned and strode toward the pit. It was spouting up giant gouts of green bile now. The horrible whisper continued to climb as Dhuul stormed toward the surface to claim our world. My father stopped at the pit's edge and peered down. He looked back at us, nodded once, and before I could raise a hand in

farewell, dropped from sight.

I stood stunned, then ran toward the pit. I couldn't bear the thought of him descending alone, no one to watch him. The magic-users shouted behind me. I arrived at the edge of the pit in time to see my father's flapping robes consumed by the vast darkness. The horrid whispers continued to swell, but now something was meeting it: a Word, more potent and resonant than anything I had ever heard.

Far below, a light flashed like an exploding star and Dhuul's whisper became a scream.

A blinding force rushed up and threw me back. In the next moment, the scream was buried by a roar. The pit was imploding. A new force pulled me from the pit's edge. I was back among the magic-users. They were leaning toward me, trying to tell me something, but I couldn't hear them. As the roaring grew, they began to disappear, popping from existence. I looked around. The entire realm was sliding toward the pit. Even the nightmare sky stretched and tore.

When you feel the membrane failing, Arianna will pull from the other side, my father had said, *but you must push. With everything you have.*

I glanced back at the pit where the Word continued to echo in my father's voice.

And I pushed.

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Two weeks later

"Your grandfather hid the blade's power well," Arianna said, looking up and down the length of my sword. "But it's just as you say. He removed the blade from the Banebrand, smelted it, and from the metal fashioned this."

"And set up his own double bluff," I said.

"I'm sorry, a double what?"

I had spent two days in the Refuge before returning home to grieve my father's death. I lived and relived our scant time together: his revelation about Lich, our walk together across the plain, our final embrace beside the pit. I was fortunate to have had those fleeting moments, I decided. But the fact was hard to reconcile with the pain of *only* having had those moments. Of never really having gotten to know the man behind the figurative mask. I spent the two weeks in a tearful fugue of thankfulness and regret until, at last, I woke up one morning—this morning, in fact—and decided to recommit myself to magic-using.

Naturally, Arianna knocked on my door shortly after.

Now sunlight streamed through her white hair as she turned from a bay window in my apartment. Though she'd adapted her attire to blend in with the modern world—a long skirt and peasant blouse with a plum-colored shawl—she still looked strange to me outside the Refuge. A place the Front no longer had to hide inside. The Front was no longer a resistance group, after all. They were no longer even "the Front." They were the Order.

"A double bluff," I repeated. "It's a concept I learned from James. My grandfather hid an enchantment inside the blade, one that cleaves magic, but beneath *that* enchantment he'd hidden the true design of the blade."

"Which could only be released by the story he'd bound it to," Arianna said.

I nodded, thinking about my staff and sword in pieces across the table at the safe house. I suspected now that Lich had disassembled it to make extra certain there was nothing inside that could harm him. All he'd found was the magic-cleaving enchantment—one he tried to warp to his own purposes, using me as his unwitting agent.

"I didn't know my grandfather was a mythologist until Marlow told me," I said. "Grandpa passed the sword on to me after I'd begun my own studies in mythology. Bound it to me." I remembered how, during our final conversation, he'd asked me to unsheathe the sword. I

hadn't been watching his face, but he'd no doubt been incanting to ensure that, if lost, the blade would find me again. It had already tasted my blood. "I must have been his fail-safe."

"Your grandfather bound the blade to you, yes," Arianna said. "But through you, it was also bound to Marlow. That was how you were able to reunite and end Lich's reign."

I nodded in growing understanding: my father and I had shared the same blood. And then something even more startling occurred to me. "So … *Lich* was the unwitting agent?"

Arianna smiled. "Even though he believed he had all the contingencies covered, Lich took a great risk in sending you to the Refuge alone. He should never have done so. But the bond between you, the Banebrand, and your father was too strong. It compelled him. And in the end, it improved the likelihood of his demise. Just as the weapon was designed to do."

I marveled at the power of the blade, but something continued to bother me. "I hate to second-guess my grandfather, but it seems like he took a huge risk, too. I mean, counting on me to find the symbols he'd left?"

"You have to remember, he was dealing with incomplete information. He assumed we were receiving his messages through his familiar, such as the location of the vault in which he'd stored the artifacts. Once he had determined which artifact was the Banebrand and made the switch, he wouldn't have told anyone, the information being far too sensitive. His focus turned to finding the glass pendant. Clearly, he never did or he would have destroyed it himself. When he felt Lich was too close, your grandfather left the clue in the vault, passed the blade to you, and ended his life. He trusted that, with the power of the blade, and enough time, you would connect with the Front and correctly interpret his message."

"Still," I said, "there were no guarantees."

"There were never any guarantees," she agreed. "Just better chances."

"I mean, I *barely* made the connection between the words and the myth before it was too late," I went on, remembering the pain of Lich's crushing tentacles, his eyes burning inches from mine.

"Your grandfather saw something else in you besides your schooling."

I pushed away the memory. "What was that?"

"Your luck quotient."

"Luck quotient?" I repeated. "I thought there was no such thing. I thought all those last-second solutions were the result of Whisperer magic."

"We told you that because a luck quotient is not a thing you want

to count on. Experience is more important. However, in this situation, it was something Marlow and I and the rest of the Front were very much counting on. With time running out, it was all we had."

That explained why they had sent me into the keep alone despite my relative inexperience.

"So … it's rare?" I asked.

"To the extent it exists in you, it is. But like I said, it can't be counted on. I'd prefer you—and us, for that matter—never to have to resort to it again. We'll start you on a new course of training once we're able to locate the remaining magic-users. That may take some time, however. Lich's segregation of the community was thorough, and he covered his tracks. Not everyone has a demonic companion." She cut her eyes to where Tabitha was snoring on her favorite divan.

That reminded me of a question I'd been pondering. "The night I faced Lich, I was blood-drained, low on power, nearly passed out from pain and exhaustion. But Thelonious never came. Is he still … with me?"

"He remains bound to you, yes," she said, "but he shrinks from the power of the collective. With enough exposure he may decide to terminate the contract on his end and leave you for good."

"That would be nice," I said. "So I can call on the collective when I feel him near?"

"Always. But it's something else you shouldn't count on, at least not in the near term. The portal to Dhuul's realm was so deep that when it collapsed, it sent shockwaves through many realms, including this one. Small tears formed in the fabric that separates them. The more experienced of the Order have already begun repairing them, but it will take time."

"Are you saying our world is *more* porous now?"

I thought about my father's sacrifice, worried now that it had been for nothing.

"None of the tears extend to Dhuul's realm, or even close," she reassured me. "The portal is sealed. But yes, our world will be more porous for a time. Creatures who yearn to enter our world will do so more easily, and sorcerers who command such creatures will become more powerful, especially where there are potent currents of ley energy. We've restored the wards in the city for you to monitor. Your work here will become more important than ever."

Her words felt daunting. "I'll have help from others in the Order, though … right?"

"When it can be spared, yes. Like I said, the most experienced will be addressing the problem at the source while others will be tracking down the Diaspora of magic-users. That's what is most urgent right now. In the meantime, you're to form a team."

“A team? Of magic-users?”

“Of anyone committed to protecting our world from the darkness and the creatures that darkness spawns. That was the original mandate of the Order. Our numbers are down, however. Lich murdered many, including our most powerful. We must solicit help where we can.”

“I suppose I can start with James,” I said, not entirely enthused at the prospect. Though he’d been a big help against Lich, our styles weren’t exactly complementary.

“We’re sending James out west,” she said.

“What’s out west?” I asked, feeling disappointment now.

“An area better suited to his particular energies. And it’s what he wanted.”

I thought of his cowboy hat and battered leather boots. Made sense, I guessed.

“We’ll introduce you to his replacement when we have one. You’ll be able to collaborate as needed.”

“No more compartmentalization then, huh?” I said with a smile. “So, where do I find this team?”

Arianna looked at me as though reading an invisible cast of bones. “They will find *you*, Everson. One at a time.”

I was preparing to ask what she meant, but she held up the sword. “We’ll have to keep this, of course.”

“Of course,” I agreed.

“But know that for twelve years you wielded the mightiest weapon the Order had ever forged. Not many can say that.” She smiled and disappeared the sword into a fold in her skirt and then produced a new sword. “Your father made this for you. It will fit inside your staff.”

My heart cramped as I accepted the sword from her and looked up and down its length. The handsome steel blade was beveled, its edge lined with silver. Runes ran down one side. Something about the grip reminded me of our final embrace, which made sense. My father would have willed the blade into being, then imbued it with his own magic. I was, in essence, carrying a part of him.

“He designed it to better channel your specific energies. As your power grows, it will unlock certain enchantments.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“I have something else for you,” she said, reaching a strong, vein-lined hand into a skirt pocket. I imagined that same hand helping deliver me from my mother’s womb more than thirty years before—much as she’d helped deliver me from Lich’s imploding realm, her powers pulling me back into the Refuge. I was the last to arrive, and though Arianna hadn’t said so, I sensed it had been close. When her

hand emerged now, it was holding a misty orb the size of a tennis ball.

"Your mother wanted you to have this," she said, handing it to me.

The mist stirred as the orb settled inside my cupped palm. A feeling of profound warmth and what I could only describe as love overcame me. I hadn't felt anything quite like it since Nana's death.

"What is it?"

"It's an emo ball," Arianna explained. "After you were born, your mother invested it with her feelings for you. She knew well the danger of her work, and if something were to happen, she didn't want you to grow up without knowing the love of a mother for her child, for you. After Lich sealed us in the Refuge, we had no way to get it to you. But the feelings of an emo ball do not fade. They are as authentic as the day your mother put them inside."

I caressed the orb. As the mist stirred again, I felt another rush of warmth and love.

"This is incredible," I said, my voice beginning to tremble. The feeling of my mother's presence was a lot how I'd imagined it would be, but also wonderfully different. Deeper. "Thanks for safeguarding it all these years." I looked from the orb to the sword and back.

"I'll leave you now," Arianna said, "but we'll be in contact."

"And if I need to reach you…?" I asked. My mind was already going to cups and flames and special parchment paper and strange formalities, wondering how that was going to work now.

"Give us a call," she said.

"A call? You mean, like, on a phone?"

"I've left a number on your counter."

I turned to where she nodded. A rectangular business card sat on the kitchen counter beside the telephone. "Oh," I said. "Okay."

"And remember," she said as she strode toward the door, "until we repair the fissures, the world will be a little stranger."

At that moment, my fog-horn alarm sounded and the hologram upstairs began to flash red.

"Good luck," she said.

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"What in the hell happened to you?" Vega asked.

"Oh." I touched the bandages on my forehead. "A group of teens thought it would be cute to call up their recently-deceased friend. An acid-flinging bug showed up instead. I … was flung at."

She smirked. "In that case, you're forgiven for being late."

I started to tell her that the encounter had happened before I'd called to invite her and Tony to dinner, then decided against it. I'd take the mulligan. I slid onto the bench beside her. The venue was a popular restaurant in Brooklyn, its interior set up to look like a Latin American plaza: picnic tables arranged around a stone fountain, trikes and Big Wheels strewn about for kids to ride and fight over. "Mr. Croft!" Tony shouted as he flashed past, pumping one of the trikes like it was a scooter. He was gone by the time I waved back.

I smiled. I figured he'd enjoy it here.

"I went ahead and ordered," Vega said. "Hope you like street tacos."

"Delicioso," I said.

"In the meantime…" She lifted a sweating margarita pitcher and poured me and her a salt-rimmed glass apiece. "I think we've earned it."

The collapse of the portal had pulled with it the Whisperer magic that had begun flowing into the world. Those who had lost their minds regained their baseline sanity—or baseline insanity, in some cases. In the hours prior, the NYPD had followed through and fumigated the city with cannabis smoke. The smoke stopped the rioting in its tracks and spared large swaths of the city. The cleanup and rebuilding were another story, but it could have been a lot worse.

"No kidding," I said wearily as we clinked glasses.

I took a large swallow, glad to be out in the world again, glad to be drinking margaritas with a … friend? Remembering my conversation with James, I snuck a sidelong look at Vega. Her midnight hair was down, spilling over the shoulders of a simple V-neck shirt that she managed to make look amazing.

Yeah, I liked her.

"Hey, slow it down," she called to her son as he zoomed past on

another circuit. But Tony was too absorbed in his laughing, hair-whipping fun to hear. She frowned and shook her head.

"How's his sitter?" I asked.

"Camilla? Aside from the two pounds she gained binge-eating, she's fine."

"Caught the munchies, huh?"

"Yeah, I don't think she's ever smoked before."

That made me laugh hard enough to get Vega laughing too. As our chuckles wound down, a small fold appeared between her dark eyes and she peered around. "I'm almost afraid to ask, but what did you mean on the phone when you said New York might get stranger?"

I shared what Arianna had told me about the collapsing portal creating tears in the boundaries between worlds. The alarm that morning seemed to lend proof to that. I doubted the teens would have been able to call up a nether creature that large or mean even a month ago.

"Great, just what the city needs," Vega muttered. "What will *you* need?"

"Cooperation with the NYPD, for starters."

"Well, you have a lot of goodwill there after coming up with the cannabis idea. I don't know that there's enough money in the budget right now to pay you, though. Not after all the costs—"

"No, no, that's not necessary," I interrupted. Though Arianna hadn't explained how, the Order had funding resources going back to antiquity—resources Lich had been tapping. I used to think the grants that kept me afloat at Midtown College were reflections of the Order's relative pleasure with my work. Turned out it was just Lich dispersing the funds erratically. Remind me never to scoff at primitive beliefs in weather gods. In any case, the Order would be paying us monthly now. Even so, I planned to keep my newly-tenured position at the college, though the change meant I was going to have to start earning grants by my own sweat now.

"This is less about me working as a consultant," I continued, "which I'm still happy to do, and more about making sure we're not working at cross purposes."

"Cross purposes? You mean like the NYPD arresting you for suspected murder?"

I gave a dry laugh, reflecting back on Vega's and my first encounter more than two years ago. And now here we were, swilling margaritas like old chums. Talk about cosmic humor. "Well, yeah, that," I said, "but also getting info without going through a lot of red tape."

"Croft, the NYPD is one of the city's largest bureaucracies. There's always going to be red tape." She took another sip and licked her

upper lip. “But you’ve got my number. If you need something, let me know. I’ll do whatever I can to get it for you.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“Only because it’s you.”

Wow, we really *had* come a long way. “Thanks,” I said. “I mean that.”

She nodded, and in one of the few times since I’d known her, I didn’t see her as a ball-breaking detective. She was simply Vega. She seemed to shift a little nearer as she studied my eyes. “What you told me about your dad on the phone. I know that’s gotta be hard.”

“It’s a process,” I said, trying not to look away. “I’ll be all right.”

A silence followed where the chatter and gleeful cries around us seemed to pull back. Our gazes drifted after Tony as he went around again.

“When we moved from Ferguson Towers to the South Bronx,” Vega said, “my dad got a job as a youth counselor. He was this big, imposing guy, but he was good with kids. Knew how to talk to them. He’d been doing that for a few years when a gang war threatened to break out in a park down the block from us. My dad had worked with some of the kids on both sides, so he went down to talk some sense into them, keep them from killing each other, you know? Fighting broke out anyway, and he was shot in the chest. They say he died before he hit the ground.”

“I am so sorry,” I said.

“I was seventeen at the time. Had sort of been at a loss as far as what I was going to do. My dad had wanted me to go to college. But at the service for him, the entire 43rd Precinct showed up, hats off, like he was one of theirs. That got me. I decided then and there to become a cop.” When she looked up at me, her eyes were dry but strangely exposed. “I guess what I’m trying to say, Croft, is that the more I get to know you, the more of myself I see.” She snorted and shook her head. “Probably doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“It does, actually.”

“The point is, I’m not going to make it harder for you to do what’s in your blood, what you’re clearly committed to. And if I can make it easier, I will. Consider me a part of your team.”

She raised her glass as though for another toast. Instead, I leaned down and kissed her. Her mouth tensed, and I was sure she was going to draw away. But then her lips softened against mine, and I tasted the salty sweetness over them. When we separated, I felt like I was awakening from a long, pleasant dream, even though the kiss had lasted two seconds, tops.

She squinted at me. “Okay, what was that?”

My head still felt gauzy, and I had to blink her into focus. “Me

saying ‘thank you’?”

“I’m flattered, Croft. I am. But I’ve got a lot going on in my life right now. There’s my work, there’s Tony. I don’t know if this is such a good…” At that moment, her son ditched his trike and ran up to the table. Red cheeked and panting, he clambered onto my lap.

“…idea,” Vega finished.

“Did you bring your cane?” Tony asked.

“It’s right here.” I reached under the bench and handed it to him, my father’s blade locked safely inside.

“Coool,” he said, looking it up and down. “When are you coming to visit the apartment again?”

“Well, that’s really up to your mom.”

“Mom, when can Mr. Croft come over?” he asked.

When I looked at Vega, her head was tilted to one side, lids half cocked as though to say, *Sure, use my kid against me.* But her lips were turning up at the corners. “Is Mr. Croft free next Sunday for lunch?” she asked.

Tony trained his large, expectant eyes on mine.

“Barring any emergencies,” I said. “He is. Absolutely.”

“Yay!” Tony said.

“Yay,” Vega echoed in deadpan, but still smiling.

Our tacos arrived, and Tony scrambled under the table and took his place opposite us. He babbled as we ate, the sound a pleasant backdrop to my thoughts about the strangeness Arianna had mentioned, the team who would find me “one at a time,” and the future of the Order. But mostly I thought about Ricki Vega and the beginnings, maybe, of something special.

“Who’s ready for more tacos?” I asked.

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Author's Notes

Assume for a moment, Everson, that everything to this point in your wizard's life was an illusion and that this *is the reality…*

You have no idea how hard that was to sit on for three books.

Back in the original author's notes for *Demon Moon* I wrote that part of the fun of writing in an established genre is deciding which rules to follow, which rules to break, and which rules to hide your plot twists behind. One popular trend in urban fantasy is to have the hero on the outs with his magical community, ever under threat of being blasted to shit if he so much as toenails the line. It's a fun device and an effective way to increase dramatic tension…

So I thought it would be even *more* fun to have the one making the threats, Chicory in this case, only posing as a representative of the magical community and for the actual community to be solidly in the hero's corner.

So, yeah, three books to execute that plot twist. I can only hope the payoff was worth the setup.

We also learned a lot more about Everson's family as well as the true history of the Order. The scenes with Everson and his grandfather in the prequel *Book of Souls* should make a lot more sense now. Grandpa's efforts certainly paid off. It will be interesting to see how the new Order, led by Arianna and the senior members, takes shape.

One thing I can guarantee? They won't be making any death threats against our hero. They're too nice, and it's Everson, for God's sake.

If this first quadrilogy was seeing Everson journey from boy to man (metaphorically, of course —the guy's in his early 30's), in the next four books we'll see him becoming more and more of a leader. I suspect Arianna's remark about a team finding him "one at a time" will prove prophetic. No more flying solo for our boy. I mean, man.

I can't wrap up this section of the author's notes without commenting on Everson and Vega. For all their differences, they've turned out to be remarkably similar. And Vega not breaking her margarita glass against Croft's head when he kissed her is promising. Does that make them relationship material?

I guess we'll find out.

I have several people to thank for the five books that make up set one of the *Prof Croft Series Box Set.*

First and foremost, thanks to DC Comics and the creators of John Constantine. The wise-cracking, chain-smoking, trench coat-wearing, no-shit-taking wizard gripped this teenager's imagination by the throat and never quite let go.

The supernatural detective type would later become popularized in genre fiction, Harry Dresden being the paragon, and deservedly so. More brilliance followed in the characters of John Taylor, Sandman Slim, Peter Grant, Alex Verus, and others. Indeed, Prof Croft joins the end of a long conga line, and I'm grateful to those authors who not only got the dance going, but made it so much fun. Appreciative nods to Prof Croft's forebears appear throughout the

series.

The Prof Croft series is set in an alternate near future following a financial crash. This was my excuse to play time-traveler and reimagine a period in the city's history that remains of immense fascination to me.

That would be the 1970s, when a struggling New York featured swaths of urban decay alongside cauldrons of artistic creativity and pockets of dizzying wealth. There were large cutbacks in city services, including police and public safety, while crime, corruption, and the vice trades boomed. So a more dangerous setting that featured multiple points of power, some official, most not, and of course many spaces for supernatural baddies to operate.

For research into the setting, I leaned heavily on Pete Hamill's *Downtown: My Manhattan*, Jonathan Mahler's *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning*, and Peter Shapiro's *Turn the Beat Around*. All stellar nonfiction books. And though the last one deals with disco, its introduction encapsulates that period as well as anything I came across.

A big kudos the team at Damonza.com who have designed all the Prof Croft covers to date, including the box set. They've been amazing to work with. Various talented people have contributed to the books over the years, including Red Adept Editing, my beta and advanced readers, most notably Beverly Collie, Mark Denman, and Bob Singer, and proof readers Sharlene Magnarella and Donna Rich. Many thanks to all of them. Naturally, any errors or inelegance are this author's alone.

I also want to thank James Patrick Cronin for his superb narration of the Prof Croft audiobooks. Those books, including samples, can be found at Audible.com.

None of this would be possible without the Strange Brigade, my dedicated fan group whose enthusiasm serves as motivation jet fuel, book after book.

Finally, thank you, intrepid reader, for embarking on this journey with the professor.

And it's only the beginning…

Best Wishes,

Brad Magnarella
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Blue Venom

Blue Blood

Blue Storm

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Join the Strange Brigade

If you'd like to get more involved in the Croftverse community, be sure to check out my VIP Facebook group, Prof Croft's Strange Brigade.

It's a cool little space where we chat about the various series and all things urban fantasy. And if you dig contests, it's definitely the place to be on release week.

We're all a little strange, but we don't have to be strangers, amirite?

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